

A photograph of the interior of Antelope Canyon, showing smooth, undulating sandstone walls illuminated by warm, golden light from a narrow opening at the top. The perspective is looking down a narrow slot, with the walls curving and reflecting the light in a mesmerizing pattern. The colors range from deep shadows to bright, almost white highlights where the light hits the sand. The overall mood is ethereal and serene.

MEDITATIONS₄

Meditations₄

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 Dhammadhara; 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 dhammatalks.org.

As with the previous volumes in this series, I would like to thank Bok Lim Kim for making the recording of these talks possible. She, more than anyone else, is responsible for overcoming my initial reluctance to have the talks recorded. I would also like to thank the following people for transcribing the talks and/or helping to edit the transcriptions: John Bullitt, Kathy Forsythe, Roger Fox, Gareth Fysh-Foskett, Richard Heiman, Linda Knudsen, Addie Onsanit, Nate Osgood, Xian Quan Osgood, Malcolm Schaeffer, Walter Schwidetzky, Atthaññu Bhikkhu, Balaggo Bhikkhu, Gunaddho Bhikkhu, Khematto Bhikkhu, and Vijakaro Bhikkhu. May they all be happy.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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The Buddha's Shoulds

January 6, 2008

Right concentration forms the heart of the path. The other factors of the path serve two functions. One is to get you into concentration; the other is to make sure you don't get stuck there. In other words, concentration on its own is a state of becoming that's useful on the path. Even though you eventually want to go beyond all states of becoming, if you don't first master this state of becoming you'll be wandering around in other states of becoming where it would be hard to see what's going on in the mind. As the Buddha said, when your mind is concentrated you can see the four noble truths as they actually come to be. When it's not concentrated, you can't see these things clearly. Non-concentration, he says, is a miserable path, leading nowhere useful at all.

So concentration is the essential factor. Only when the mind is stable and still can it really see what's going on inside. To get into right concentration, you need the other path factors: right view all the way up through right mindfulness. Right view starts with conviction in the principle of kamma, that there are good and bad actions that give good and bad results — not only in this lifetime but also in future lifetimes — and that there are people who really know these things from direct experience. It's not just a theory.

What's interesting here is that when the Buddha presents this introduction to his teaching on kamma, he focuses on two types of good actions to stress their importance: gratitude to your parents and generosity. These things really do have merit; they really do have value. The fact that your parents gave birth to you was not just a set of impersonal processes that just happened to happen. It's not the case that you don't owe any debt of gratitude to your parents for having gone through all the pain of giving birth to you and then raising you once you were born. There really is a personal debt there. They made choices, sometimes difficult choices, that allowed for your survival. Generosity is one of the ways you pay off that debt, and it's also one of the valuable ways you interact well with other beings, benefiting both them and yourself in the process.

The Buddha's attitude towards generosity is instructive. He's very clear on the fact that when he's telling you what you should do, the "should" is based on a condition. After all, the Buddha didn't create you. You might resist his shoulds with the thought, "Who is he to tell me what to do?"

Years back I was sitting in on a course on the Metta Sutta. The first line in the Metta Sutta starts: "This is what should be done by one who aims at a state of peace." As the teacher started out with that line, a hand immediately shot up. A man sitting in the class said, "I thought Buddhism didn't have any shoulds." And they spent the rest of the morning going back and forth over that one issue.

Actually, Buddhism does have a lot of shoulds. You look at the Dhammapada and you'll see that it's full of shoulds. But each should is based on a condition, as in the first line of the Metta Sutta: "This is what should be done by one who aims at a state of peace." The Buddha doesn't tell you that you have to aim at a state of peace, or that you have to want true happiness. That's your choice. But if that is what you want, this is what you've got to do. The nature of cause and effect is such that these are the practices you have to follow. The Buddha isn't saying, "Well, this is what worked for me and it may work for you, but I'm not sure, so you have to find your own way." That's not what he would say. He'd say, "This is what works if you're aiming at this goal." And it's up to you to decide whether you want to aim at that goal. If you do, then you've got to do it this way.

There's a passage where King Pasenadi comes to visit the Buddha, and his first question is, "Where should a gift be given?" The Buddha responds, "Wherever you feel inspired." In other words, there are no shoulds in this area aside from your own sense of inspiration — where you feel the gift would be well used or where you just want to give. There are no restraints placed on the act of generosity at all. But then the King follows up with another question: "Where, when a gift is given, does it bear great fruit?" And the Buddha says, "That's a different question." This is where the principle of cause and effect kicks in, placing its imperatives. You have to give to someone whose mind is pure or to an institution where the people are being trained to make their minds pure — i.e., the Sangha — if you want your gift to bear great fruit.

So there *are* shoulds in the Buddha's teachings, but they're based on the principle of what actually works for the purpose of true happiness. As for what you want to do with your life, there's no imposition there at all. It's your choice. But once you appreciate the principle of generosity and see that it is really worthwhile, you've made the choice to get started on the path. As the Buddha

said, it's impossible for someone who is stingy to attain jhana, to attain any of the noble attainments.

So you start with the principle that generosity is good and that your actions matter. When you dig a little bit deeper into the principle of action, you realize that your intentions are what matter in your actions. This insight leads to the next step in the path: right resolve. You want to avoid intentions that would make it difficult to get the mind into concentration, so you want to learn how to go beyond being resolved on sensual passion, being resolved on ill will, being resolved on harmfulness — because all these things stir up the mind and interfere with its settling down.

There's a passage in the Canon where Prince Jayasena, walking for exercise through a forest one day, comes across a novice staying in a little wilderness hut. He says to the novice, "I hear that when the monks really apply themselves, they can get their minds into a state of one-pointedness. Is that true?" And the novice says, "Yes." And the prince says, "Well, explain it to me." And the novice, who probably knew the prince's reputation, says, "You wouldn't understand." The prince responds, "Well, I just might." So the novice replies, "In that case, I'll explain it to you, but if you don't understand, don't harass me with more questions, okay?" So the prince agrees. But when the novice explains it to him, the prince says, "That's impossible. Nobody can get their minds concentrated like that." He gets up and leaves. The novice then goes to see the Buddha and tells him what happened. And the Buddha says, "What did you expect? That person is immersed in sensual passion, on fire with sensual fever, being chewed up by his sensual thoughts: How would he understand anything like this — something that has to be attained through renunciation?"

This is why the Buddha has you put sensual passion aside, for it prevents the mind from getting concentrated. It prevents you from even conceiving of the possibility of getting concentrated. Similarly with ill will and harmfulness: If you hold ill will for somebody, if you want to be harmful to that person, then as soon as the mind settles down to be quiet in the present moment, those thoughts are sure to flare up. They obsess you. So the Buddha has you resolve to put them aside.

When you want to act on those right resolves, this is where right action, right speech, and right livelihood come in. Some people find the Buddha's precepts too hard to follow; other people say they're not inclusive enough. The ones who say that they're not inclusive enough insist that we have to be more responsible. If

there's a precept against killing, you shouldn't be able to eat meat. If there's a precept against stealing, you shouldn't abuse the earth's resources. They make the precepts bigger and bigger and bigger all the time to the point where they become impossible, too big to be fully put into practice. Or in some cases it is possible to practice them fully, but the Buddha said it wasn't necessary to go that far. We're working on the precepts that help the mind get concentrated, which is why they go only as far as they do. In other words, you don't want to act on an unskillful intention and you don't want to tell other people to act on those intentions. But as far as breaches of the precepts where you don't know what's happening or it's not intentional, those don't count. After all, the intention is the important part of concentration, and you want to train the mind to master its intentions in areas where you have some control over your life and over your actions.

Once you've created this context for the practice, you're in a better position to follow the parts of the path that deal directly with right concentration.

First there's right effort, which means generating the desire to get rid of unskillful qualities of the mind — i.e., the things that get in the way of concentration, like the hindrances — and then to give rise to skillful qualities, like the factors for Awakening. This is an area where desire is a useful part of the path. It gives you the energy you need to work on the mind and to realize that you've got to make choices. There are skillful and unskillful things arising in the mind, but right view — in terms of the principle of kamma — reminds you that the unskillful ones will lead to bad results, and the skillful ones to good results. So you can't just sit there totally passive as you watch them arise and pass away, because that doesn't lead to concentration. You've got to foster the good qualities and abandon the unskillful ones.

In the next step of the path, the Buddha surrounds right effort with right mindfulness — “surrounding” it in the sense that you add two additional qualities to right effort. As the text says, you bring three qualities to bear on your contemplation: You want to be ardent, alert, and mindful. The ardency there is right effort. The mindfulness means that you keep your frame of reference in mind — as when we're keeping the breath in mind right now. The alertness means seeing what's happening in the present moment, seeing if you really are with the breath, if the mind is settling down well with the breath, and catching it when you've forgotten. You're trying to establish a frame of reference here because these four frames of reference — the body in and of itself, feelings in and

of themselves, the mind in and of itself, and mental qualities in and of themselves — are the themes or topics of right concentration. Mindfulness practice and concentration practice go hand in hand on the Buddha's path. Then, as you're trying to get the mind to settle down with its frame of reference, you have to start evaluating it to see what works and what doesn't work. As your frame of reference gets more and more solid, you actually move into the factors of jhana.

So that's what you should do to get into jhana — if you want it. Again, the Buddha doesn't say you have to do it, but if you want it, this is what you should do.

Jhana on its own doesn't lead to the end of suffering. There are a lot of passages describing people who attain different levels of jhana and are able to maintain them, but if they don't go beyond that, they end up getting reborn in the various Brahma worlds after they die. Then when they fall from there, who knows where they're going to land? One sutta shows people falling from the Brahma worlds and doing really stupid things. They've been so blissed out for so long that they've forgotten that their actions can carry consequences, so they act in wanton and careless ways.

This is why, once the mind is firmly in jhana, you've got to start applying right view again. Only this time it's right view in terms of the four noble truths: looking for the stress in your activities and seeing where it's coming from in your mind. In other words, you look at mental events and mental states simply in terms of cause and effect, what's skillful and what's unskillful. Those are the basic categories underlying the four noble truths.

So as we're meditating here, remind yourself that the concentration is what we're after, what we're focusing on doing right here. Everything else on the path is aimed either at getting us here or else at making sure that once we *are* here we make the best use of the opportunity really to see things as they happen. In particular, we want to see this issue of how the mind is creating all this unnecessary stress all the time and what can be done to stop it. Of course, if you only want to follow part of the path, that's up to you. Remember, the Buddha never forced us to do anything. But if you want the best results, this is what you've got to do.

One Thing Clear Through

June 26, 2006

A recurrent theme in the teachings of the forest ajaans is that all the steps of the practice are of a piece. In other words, having attained Awakening, they don't say anything disparaging about the early steps in the practice, that they're only elementary and that you have to drop them to move on to the more important stuff. As Luang Pu Dune put it, "The Dhamma is one thing clear through." Or as Ajaan Maha Boowa once said, one of the realizations that comes when you hit Awakening is that everything is the same teaching, starting from generosity and gratitude, all the way up through Awakening. There are different levels of subtlety, but it's all the same principle.

And you could see this fact in their lives. Even having attained Awakening, they didn't just sit around and say, now that their own job was done, they didn't have to do anything further. They were very industrious people. Ajaan Fuang, even when he was sick, would get out every evening and do some chore around the monastery. When we were doing construction work, he wasn't up to doing any of the heavy jobs but at the very least he would go out and pick up the thrown-away nails. He was very frugal, very meticulous.

So it's important to keep this principle in mind: that the practice here is a practice of generosity, of gratitude, of goodwill and kindness, all the way through. Look at the Buddha's teachings on the four noble truths. What are they motivated by if not goodwill? The desire for an end of suffering, the desire for happiness that doesn't place any burdens on anyone else: What is this if not compassion?

And look at his teaching career. Wherever there was anyone ready to learn the Dhamma, he would go there. In those days, that meant going on foot. He traveled all over northern India on foot just to teach. Even the very last day of his life, he knew there was one more person he had to teach before he entered total nibbana. So, even though he was suffering from dysentery, he walked all the way to Kusinara — a full day's walk — because there was one more person, Subhadda, he had to teach.

What this means in our practice is that we should value all levels of the practice. It's not that you put in time with the elementary levels and then drop them as you move on to the higher ones. You simply add more and more levels of subtlety to your practice, more and more levels of generosity, goodwill, and gratitude. The Buddha started his teaching with very basic mundane right view: the teaching on kamma. And he introduced kamma with two teachings: one on gratitude, one on generosity.

He started out by saying that generosity is real. The gifts you give actually benefit you and the other person. This is something of real value. And you can think of the whole practice — all the way through the abandoning of greed, anger, and delusion — as an act of generosity, an act of goodwill. The less greed, anger, and delusion you have, the better off not only you are, but also everybody else. Think of all the suffering you've inflicted not only on yourself but also on other people through your anger, your greed, your delusion. You give these things up not only for your own benefit but for the benefit of the people around you as well.

Then there's the teaching on gratitude. The Buddha focused on the gratitude we owe our parents — that the good they've done for us is something of value. We really are in their debt. All that your mother went through just to give birth to you: Think about that. In Thailand it's traditional for there to be a chant on this topic before an ordination. They hire somebody to come in, and he chants for a couple hours about all the hardships your parents went through to raise you, as a way of reminding you of your debt to them. In Thailand, there's a very strong sense that you ordain as an act of gratitude to your parents. You dedicate the merit to them. So right before the ordination they remind you of exactly how big that debt is. If the chant lasts for four hours, three and a half of the hours are about the pains your mother went through being pregnant with you. You're fortunate she didn't abort you — she could have done that. You're fortunate your parents didn't abandon you after you were born — they could have done that as well. They went to all that trouble to raise you, to teach you how to speak, how to sit, how to walk. There's a huge debt of gratitude you owe them.

As the Buddha said, gratitude is a sign of a good person. If you don't appreciate the good that other people have done for you, it's very unlikely that you're going to do good for anybody at all. Ajaan Fuang, if he noticed that people didn't have gratitude for their parents, didn't want to associate with them. If

people can't appreciate their parents, what are they going to appreciate? Gratitude is essential to every form of goodness.

And it carries you all the way through. This is why we're generous; this is why we practice the precepts, why we're harmless. We meditate to train the mind so that it's harmless. Not only harmless, but also more energetic. If you're not weighing yourself down with greed, anger, and delusion, you have a lot more energy to help other people. And even though there's that popular conception of Theravada as a selfish path, as someone who had studied Buddhism both in Japan and in Thailand once said, you won't find that Thai people are any more selfish than Japanese people. In fact, it can often be the other way around.

The example of the Buddha in the Pali Canon is not a selfish example. Sariputta and Moggallana were extremely helpful not only in teaching other monks but also in teaching laypeople. And look at all the rules in the Vinaya for the monks to look after the monastery. Basically, the monastery is pure generosity. If you were to open your eyes right now and look around, everything you'd see would be somebody's gift. And as for the monks, the longer you live as a monk, the more and more the very bones of your body are the results of somebody's generosity. They say that after seven years all the cells in your body have been changed, so once a monk has hit seven years, his whole body is somebody else's gift. So you've got to use it wisely, generously, in the same spirit with which it was given to you. And as for the monastery around you, you're trained to look after the place. The Buddha encouraged the monks to be clean, to be careful in the way they use things, to put a lot of energy into looking after the results of other peoples' generosity.

In the forest tradition, there's a very strong tradition of keeping alive the protocols that the Buddha gives in the Khandhakas. There's a Vinaya textbook that the monks in Thailand are supposed to study, written by a city monk back at the beginning of the twentieth century, and he cut back on a lot of these rules. This textbook was never popular with the forest tradition. They preferred an older book that went into a lot of detail, particularly on the 14 protocols, most of which deal with looking after the monastery: when you come to a monastery, how you're supposed to set things in order; when you leave, how you're supposed to leave it in good shape; and while you're there, how you keep it clean. A lot of energy should go into keeping the monastery in good shape because a lot of energy went into giving the monastery in the first place.

So the Buddha never discouraged people from being generous. He never discouraged people from being energetic. Ajaan Suwat liked to make this point again and again: There's no place where the Buddha encourages laziness. Even though he teaches contentment, it's contentment with the material things you already have, so that you can devote yourself to building on that, and especially so that you can devote yourself to the training of the mind. But contentment doesn't mean that if you find the place dirty you leave it dirty. Contentment means that if you just have a little shack, you're content with your shack, but you make it a clean shack. You keep it spic and span, in good repair. *Utthana-sampada* is the word in Pali. It means that you take initiative, you're energetic.

And this translates into your meditation. The sort of person who's energetic in keeping the place clean tends to be more energetic in meditating. Once when I'd just arrived in Bangkok on some visa business, I was in the midst of cleaning my room, sweeping it, wiping it down. A Western monk who'd just returned from Burma knew that I might be there, so he came around and sure enough I had just come in. But as soon as he saw me wiping down the floor, he said, "You Thai monks! All you do is spend your time cleaning up. Over in Burma, we have other people who do that for us." And as you looked at the quality of his meditation, you could see that he was used to having other people doing things for him. His meditation had gotten slack and sloppy as well.

This is a strong tradition in the forest tradition, starting from the time of Ajaan Mun. He was very diligent in keeping his place clean. His place in the forest wasn't just some hovel. Everything was neatly swept, everything in its proper place. As Ajaan Fuang said, even the rags for wiping feet at the base of the stairs to his little hut: If they were torn, he would sew them; if they were dirty, he would wash them. And this quality of being energetic and meticulous translated into his meditation as well.

So don't think that the elementary practices are just for people on an elementary level. They're for everybody. That's how everybody gets started and everybody keeps going. You build on them. You don't abandon them. You build on them. You include more and more subtle levels. But the basic levels stay there as well, until, as the texts say, generosity is no longer something you do for your own sake or for the sake of other people. It becomes just a natural expression of the mind. All the steps of the practice become a natural expression of the mind once it's fully trained.

Befriending the Breath

January 3, 2007

Reflect back on the passage we chanted just now: “May I be happy. May all living beings be happy. May all beings be freed from their suffering. May those who are happy not be deprived of their happiness.” These are good thoughts to think. They put the mind in a good place, a place where you’re not wishing ill to anyone at all. You’re wishing them well. And you’re wishing well for yourself, too. Sometimes people find that hard, but if you can’t wish for your own true happiness, what are you wishing for?

The desire for true happiness is nothing to feel ashamed about. In fact, the whole teaching of the Dhamma is based on that desire, recognizing that if you follow through with your desire for true happiness intelligently, if you really are careful about how you go about finding it, you’ll actually find it and won’t harm anyone in the process. It’s a desire that should be respected.

The world, however, teaches us not to respect it. People will tell you, “Forget about true lasting happiness; just go for the thrill of purchase, the thrill of a relationship in the beginning stages. Go for the quick and easy, but also the quick to fade. As for true happiness, forget about it.” That’s what they say.

But the message of the Dhamma is that if you don’t wish for true happiness, what are you wishing for? This is the one assumption that the Buddha makes about human beings. Sometimes you read that the Buddha assumes that everybody is basically good at heart, but you can’t find that in the texts. What he does assume is that everyone wants happiness. The problem is that we go about it in confused and misinformed ways. But if we can find a path to true happiness that really works, everyone would be happy because true happiness is something that doesn’t harm anyone at all. Your true happiness doesn’t conflict with anyone else’s true happiness. Keep that in mind. This is why we chant this passage every day.

They say that Ajaan Mun spread thoughts of goodwill to all living beings three times a day: in the morning when he woke up, in the afternoon when he woke up from his nap, and at night before he went to sleep. In this way, the desire

for goodwill, the desire for true happiness, framed his practice. So it's good to establish it as a frame for your practice as well. It helps remind you of why you're here. There will be barren patches in your meditation, patches where things don't seem to be going the way you want them to. When you hit these patches, remember that you're doing this for true happiness, something that goes beyond the ordinary quick fix. That helps get you over the rough spots.

So always keep these thoughts in mind. Remember that goodwill and compassion are qualities you can't separate from the Buddha's teachings on wisdom and discernment. You have to understand how to go about true happiness if your desire for happiness is actually going to get results.

What this comes down to is training the mind. All the Buddha's teachings — on generosity, virtue, and meditation, or on virtue, concentration, and discernment — are aimed at training the mind because the mind is what shapes our experience of pleasure and pain, happiness and suffering. A well-trained mind can deal with any situation in life and not have to suffer at all.

What does it mean to train the mind? It means to look at what you're doing and to see what the results are. Then you learn to refrain from things that cause suffering, no matter how much you like doing them, and to do the things that lead to true happiness, whether you like doing them or not. Some of the things that lead to true happiness are really pleasant to do. Others require effort. They go against the grain. You have to learn not to let your resistance to the effort get in the way. You need a clear sense of cause and effect. That's what discernment is all about: seeing what really works in terms of cause and effect, what doesn't really work, and then adjusting your actions accordingly.

We're here to train the mind to be its own best friend. One very visceral way of doing this is to focus on your breath. When the Buddha analyzes the way you cause yourself suffering, very early on in the list he says that if you're ignorant of what's really going to work, then even the way you breathe can lead to suffering.

So let's focus on the way we breathe. Where do you sense the breath right now? When you close your eyes, what sensations let you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out? Focus on them. They can be in any part of the body at all, for "breath" here means the flow of energy. Sometimes you'll sense the breath as the feeling of the air moving in and out of the nose, but it can also be the rise and fall of the abdomen, the rise and fall of the chest. Sometimes those movements send ripples out to different parts of the body, so that you can sense even in your arms or your legs whether you're breathing in or

breathing out. So wherever you find it convenient to focus, focus on the breath sensations there.

Then allow them to be comfortable. In other words, don't put too much pressure on them as you focus on them. At the same time, notice how long an in-breath feels good. At what point does the in-breath start feeling uncomfortable? Just breathe in as long as is comfortable, and then allow yourself to breathe out. Breathe out only as long as is comfortable, and then breathe back in again. Try to sensitize yourself to what feels good right now in terms of the breathing.

Think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, with every cell in your body bathed with breath energy. When you think of the breath in that way, what kind of breathing feels good? You might find, as you start thinking in that way, that the breath gets deeper. If that feels gratifying, fine. If it feels uncomfortable, change the rhythm. Just think, "What would be more comfortable right now?" and see what the body does in response. Think of yourself as hovering around the breath. You're not squeezing it out; you're not forcing it in; you're just staying very close to it, watching it, letting it adjust in whatever way feels good. Give it some space to adjust. Sometimes you might want to nudge it a little bit and see what longer breathing would feel like, or what shorter breathing would feel like, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow, and then notice what happens.

At first you may not sense much difference, but after a while you begin to get more sensitive to the breathing process. You become more of a connoisseur of your own breathing. You gain a sense of what kind of breathing really feels good for the body right now. The more satisfying the breath is, the easier you will find it to stay with the breathing. If the mind wanders off, just bring it right back to the breath. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Ask yourself, "Is the breath as comfortable as it could be?" and see what you need to change. But don't browbeat yourself over the fact that the mind is wandering. Don't get upset or discouraged. It's natural that it'll wander, for that's what it's been doing for so long.

You've probably heard the word *samsara*. It means wandering around. That's what the mind is used to doing. It's used to wandering. When you try to get it to stay in one place like this, it's going to resist. It's like training a puppy. You want it to come, and it seems to want to do everything else but come. But if you're firm with it, at the same time rewarding it when it does come, after a while it'll come willingly. So have some confidence in yourself. Remind yourself that this is a

really useful skill to have, because we cause ourselves so much unnecessary stress and strain simply because we breathe in unskillful and oblivious ways. If you can master just this one skill, you change the way you relate to your body, you change the way you relate to the present moment, you have a greater reserve of wellbeing to draw on in any situation. If they threw you in prison, you could just sit there and breathe really comfortably. They wouldn't have to know. So in that way, you're not adding suffering to the pain already there.

So, you have an hour to get acquainted with the breath, to try to see what kind of breathing feels good right now, and then right now, right now. The needs of the body will change over time, so you have to be on top of them. Notice how they change. Make it a game. Don't be too grim about the meditation. After all, we're here trying to find pleasure in the breath. So treat it as a sport, something you want to learn how to enjoy. As with any sport, it takes time, it takes training, it takes discipline. But there's also the element of enjoyment that comes when you're doing it well. It feels good. It feels right.

After all, the breath is the process in the body that you experience most directly. You sense your body through the movement of the breath. If the breath were not moving, of course you'd be dead. But if you could somehow be alive while the breath was not moving, even then you wouldn't sense the body at all. In fact, there are stages of concentration where the breath energy stops. The oxygen coming in through the pores of the skin is enough to keep you going because the brain is very still and isn't using much oxygen at that time. When that happens, you find that the shape of the body begins to dissolve. The breath is *that* essential to how you know your body.

In addition, the breath is also instrumental in how you move your body, by means of the breath energy running through the nerves and along the blood vessels. So here you are sensitizing yourself to your most direct experience of the body, and you're learning to relate to the body in a way that's comfortable.

At the same time, you find that the breath is a mirror for the mind. A sudden emotion comes into the mind, and the breath will change. That's one of the reasons we sometimes feel that we've got to get our anger out of our system: The way the breath has changed in response to the anger is uncomfortable. So you can undo that effect. As soon as you sense a change in the breath, you can consciously breathe in a way that dissolves away whatever tension has built up in the breathing. That weakens the power of the anger. This is another way the breath can be your friend. It's like having a friend who reminds you when you get

angry that it's not in your best interest to be angry. It can soothe you when you're angry, put you in a better mood. It can be your friend when you're sick; it can be your friend when you're suffering from fear or any other strong, unpleasant emotion.

The breath can be there as your friend, but only if you learn how to befriend it. Get to know it. As with any friendship, it takes time. You can't just walk in and shake hands and say "Hi, you're my breath, I'm in charge of you, let's go." The breath doesn't respond well to that, just as a person wouldn't respond well to some stranger coming up and saying that. After all, you've been a stranger to your breath for who knows how long. It has been there for you, but you haven't been there for it. You haven't paid it much attention. You don't really know it well. So here's your opportunity to get on good terms with the breath. When you have your breath as your friend, you have a friend wherever you go, in any situation.

As the Buddha said, to really get to know someone requires (1) time and (2) being very observant. So. Here you've got a whole hour of time. It's up to you to be observant and to see how well you can get to know the breath. To show some goodwill for the breath in a very direct and visceral way like this is to show goodwill for yourself, the wish that's expressed in that chant: "May I be happy." Here's one way to act on it. At the same time, you cause no harm to anyone else. The way you breathe doesn't directly affect anyone else at all. Indirectly, if you breathe in unskillful ways and uncomfortable ways, you're going to get irritable and take it out on other people. But if you're breathing comfortably, there's no irritation to take out on anybody at all. In this way, the fact that you're working with your breath is a way of showing goodwill for other people too.

So try to make the most of this opportunity.

A Magic Set of Tools

August 10, 2004

As you're sitting here, there are a lot of things you could focus on in the present moment. You could focus on the sound of the crickets. You could focus on the sound of the bombing practice off to the west, the temperature of the air — all kinds of things. The question is: Which thing are you going to focus on that's going to deliver the best results for the mind?

This is where the breath comes in. It's something that's here all the time — coming in, going out, staying still — giving us our sense of the body. It's a place where we can settle down, something we can stay in touch with at all times — if we're mindful.

It's important to understand what *mindfulness* is: It's the act of keeping something in mind. The word *sati* is related to the verb *sarati*, which means to remember. You focus your attention on one particular thing and then keep reminding yourself to stay there. This is how concentration is developed. But concentration is not just a question of memory. To be a part of the path, it has to be alert as well. We're not trying to put ourselves into a trance. We simply want to stay focused on an aspect of the present moment that's going to be helpful. Mindfulness is what reminds us to stay at that present sensation or present occurrence; alertness is what allows us to see what's going on.

The third quality we add is persistence or ardency. Keep with it. No matter how loud the bombs or incessant the crickets, you're not going to send your attention after them. You know they're there. You're not going to deny that they're there, but they're simply not places you want to go. You're going to keep tabs on this one thing: the breath coming in, going out. If you prefer a meditation word, you can stay with *buddho*. If you want, you can focus on the parts of the body, like the bones, skin, your liver — anything that keeps you grounded here in the present moment in a way that helps mindfulness and alertness to grow, to develop.

Your ability to stick with these qualities is what's going to help them grow. When you notice yourself wandering off, ardency means that you bring the mind

right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. You don't give up. You don't get discouraged. While you're with the breath, ardency means that you try to be as sensitive as possible to the sensation of the breathing. The more consistent your sensitivity, the more refined the sense of comfort you'll derive from the breathing. As Ajaan Lee says, when you're mindful and alert like this, mindfulness and alertness change into the factors of *jhana*, or steady absorption.

We often hear that mindfulness practice and concentration practice are two different things, but the Buddha never taught them that way. He said that right mindfulness leads naturally to right concentration. In all of the descriptions of the path — such as the noble eightfold path, the five faculties, the seven factors for awakening — right mindfulness always precedes right concentration. So don't think of them as separate practices; think of them as qualities of the mind that help each other along. Mindfulness turns into directed thought as it shades into the steadiness of concentration. Once concentration gets more solid, your mindfulness gets a lot steadier. When you reach the fourth *jhana*, the Buddha says, that's where mindfulness becomes pure.

The word *jhana* is related to a verb *jhayati*, which is a homonym for a verb *to burn* — to burn in a steady way, like the flame of this candle at the front of the room. Pali has different verbs for the word *to burn*. There's the burning of an ordinary fire that flickers and flares, but then there's *jhayati*, which describes the burning of an oil lamp — steady, so steady you can read by it. And that's the whole purpose of getting the mind to stay steadily here in the present moment: so that you can read what's going on in the mind.

In the beginning, the steadiness requires some protection, just like the candle here. If the wind outside started to flare up more than it is right now, we'd have to put a glass globe around the candle to keep the flame steady. That glass globe is directed thought and evaluation. Keep reminding yourself to come back — stay with the breath, stay with the breath, stay with the breath — consistently. And then evaluation, which grows out of alertness, looks at the breath: Is this a comfortable place to stay? What do you need to adjust? Do you need to move the focus of your attention? Do you need to adjust the breath? Do you need to adjust some of the concepts in your mind about what you're doing? If the breath is too subtle to follow, can you stay simply with the sense of the body sitting here? There are lots of things to evaluate.

This is where the element of discernment or insight comes into the practice. Again, we often hear that *jhana* practice is a tranquility practice and insight

practice is something else, but again, the Buddha didn't divide things up that way. He said that you need tranquility and insight in order to get the mind to become steady like this. The insight lies in understanding what problems you have to face and how you can get around them; the tranquility lies in the element of steadily, calmly watching things.

So you use directed thought and evaluation to protect what you've got. As a sense of ease and fullness develops in the present moment, you've got to protect it even more. Stick with it, work at whatever you need to do to maintain that sense of wellbeing — learning when you're trying too hard to make it better, learning when you're not trying hard enough to notice what can be done to relax things even further, make them even more gratifying and pleasurable. That's all a function of insight: watching things, evaluating things, figuring out which causes to change to make the effects just right.

This is the element of insight, the element of discernment that we're working on while we're on the path. We develop it in simple practices like this: learning what's just right in terms of the breath. That's the middleness of our middle way right now. The word *middleness* also applies to the appropriateness of what we're doing. Sometimes we have to be very protective of what we're doing when there are lots of external distractions, or when the mind itself seems to be rambunctious and hard to control. We have to make an extra effort during times like that. At other times, the effort doesn't have to be quite so strong: All you need to do is just watch, keep tabs on things, and they seem to behave on their own. If you mess with them too much, they're going to rebel, so you have to be very sensitive to what's needed, what's going on. This is part of the middleness of the middle way: the appropriateness of what you're doing. As you develop this sense of appropriateness, this sense of "just right," you're developing discernment in the midst of concentration practice. The Buddha said there's no discernment without jhana, no jhana without discernment. The two qualities help each other along.

So if you find yourself slipping off the breath, slipping off the topic of your meditation, remember these things. When things get balanced, you don't have to think about them that much. Once you develop a sense of balance, you just maintain that balance in your practice. It'll be sub-verbal.

It's like sailing a boat. When you get on the boat for your first sailing lessons and you're told to steer the boat to the left, sometimes you flip it over because you steer too hard. Or you're told to steer to the right, and again you flip it over

in the other direction because you're steering too hard. But after a while you begin to get a sense of exactly how much pressure you have to apply to the rudder, and you get so that you hardly even think about it. It becomes an intuitive sense. You're alert to it — you have to be alert — but you don't have to verbalize it. This is what we're working toward in the practice: gaining that intuitive sense of what's just right for right now — when you have to apply a little bit more pressure, when you have to hold back a little bit — so that you don't need all these concepts.

As the meditation gets more and more intuitive, as the mind gets more and more firmly settled right here, you can actually drop the directed thought and evaluation and just plow right into the sensation of the breath or whatever your object is. When you get there, you begin to wonder, "Why did you ever think you had to do anything more in the meditation than just be right here?" That's what it seems like from that perspective. So watch out that you don't get complacent, because you *can* lose this. It's simply a matter of having that intuitive sense of where your spot is and how to stay there. This is how to develop a foundation for the mind: You use mindfulness and alertness, you use your discernment to get the mind concentrated, and then once it's concentrated you use that concentration to discern things even more clearly. All the factors of the path help one another, and they all come together. There's a unity to the path. Even though it has eight folds, it's one piece of paper.

So if these thoughts are helpful when you find yourself drifting off or losing balance, keep them in mind. There will come a point where you don't have to consciously remember them. All you'll have to do is be very watchful, very alert, making sure you're not complacent, and you can drop the concepts. Dropping them doesn't mean you'll forget them. They'll be there to pick up again when you need them, but you don't have to carry them around all the time. They're like a magic set of tools: They float right within reach. You don't have to carry them. Or like your shadow: It goes everywhere you go, but you don't have to carry it with you. It places no weight on you at all.

A Private Matter

July 15, 2007

I once heard of a tennis pro whose game had gone into a slump. He tried everything he could imagine to get his game back: fired his trainer, got another trainer, tried different rackets. Then one day he realized he'd forgotten the number one lesson in tennis: Keep your eye on the ball.

The same sort of thing often happens in meditation. You start out with a very simple process and then it gradually grows more complicated. After a while you forget the first principles: i.e., stay with your breath. So try to spend the whole hour staying with the breath, no matter what. Be really sensitive to how the breath feels, and to what you're doing to the breath. The breath is a fabrication, which means that there's an intentional element in the way you breathe. You want to be very sensitive to that, to what you're adding to the breathing process. Try to do it skillfully. As long as you're going to add an intentional element, add something good.

Your relation to the breath is something very intimate, very private. Often it's hard to talk about how the breath feels, because the breath feels like the breath feels. It doesn't quite feel like anything else. So we talk about it indirectly, in terms of metaphors and similes, realizing that our descriptions are approximate. When you hear something in the instructions, learn to translate it in such a way that it relates to what's happening in your direct experience. And keep your inner experience primary.

For example, I've noticed that one of the best ways of getting the breath energy in the body to be comfortable and full is not to put any effort into the out-breath at all. What effort there may be goes into the in-breath. As for breathing out, you don't need to help the body. It's going to breathe out on its own. When you don't force it out, that allows the breath energy to fill up in the body. This is hard to put precisely into words. It's not like you're trying to stuff the breath in, but because you don't squeeze it out, then each time you breathe in, breathe in, breathe in, and allow the sense of fullness to run along your nerves, the nerves begin to glow. Again, this doesn't fit easily into words, for it's not a visible glow.

But there's a feeling of glow-like energy filling the nerves, radiating out from them, radiating out of the blood vessels. You try to breathe in such a way that maintains that sense of radiance. The body then feels a lot more comfortable, the blood can flow freely through all the different parts of the body. It feels really good.

So try to relate that to what you're doing right now and see if you get results. If you don't, try experimenting a little bit on your own to see which way of breathing really *does* feel good in the body. When you do this, it sets up the issue of pleasure and pain, cause and effect, right from the start.

That's what the Buddha's teachings are all about: Why do we suffer from pain? How can we use the pleasure of a concentrated mind to lead us to even greater ease and wellbeing? Often it's best not to analyze the issue too much in advance. You can read the books on jhana or vipassana, and then try to impose the words on your experience. And of course your understanding of the words comes from where? It comes from ignorance. So that takes you away from your direct experience, away from this very private matter of why the mind is causing itself suffering, how your intentions are causing suffering.

So instead, try to approach the meditation from a standpoint that's more familiar: How do you feel right now? Which ways of thinking about the breath, which ways of letting the body breathe, lead to pain and a sense of constriction? Which ones lead to a greater sense of openness and ease? Start from your immediate experience and branch out from there.

That's the way Ajaan Fuang used to teach meditation. He'd have people get in touch with their breath. He'd use a few analogies and similes, and then he'd listen to the words *they* used to describe their own experience of meditation, when the breath felt "sticky," when it felt "solid" or "dense," when it felt "full." And then he'd use their vocabulary to teach them further. For instance, one of his students would talk about the "delicious breath," so Ajaan Fuang would start his instructions to that student by saying, "Get in touch with the delicious breath."

In this way, the meditation is not something imposed from outside. It's something that develops from your own inner sensitivity. Then somewhat after the fact, after you've had some direct experience with it, you can read the books and begin to relate their terms to what you've experienced. Even then, though, it's always best to take those terms and use them as post-it notes, for as you develop your inner experience further, your understanding of the inner terrain is going to change. You may have to move some of those notes around.

This is a much more trustworthy way of approaching the meditation than trying to fit the mind into a mold based on your understanding of what somebody else has written or said. If you do that, it takes you away from your direct experience, from your own sensitivity. And there's always that element of doubt: Does this really qualify as what they're talking about? Whereas if you approach it from the other direction — "If I do it this way, how does it feel?" — you know better than anybody else how it feels.

Now, your sensitivity may not be refined enough to see subtle levels of stress, but there's no way you're going to see those subtle levels until you deal with the blatant ones first. And it's a natural matter that over time, as you get more familiar with the breath, more familiar with the way the body feels from the inside, your powers of sensitivity are going to develop. You pick up things that you didn't notice before, both in the breath and in the way the mind relates to the breath. This way you keep the meditation very direct. It's your own private matter.

Ajaan Fuang once said that he didn't want his students discussing their meditation with anybody else aside from him. When you talk to other people, they have their ideas, they have their preconceived notions. Maybe they know something about meditation, maybe they're very wise, but that in itself is a questionable thing. You don't know how experienced they are, how much they really know. Secondly, you may start taking their words and trying to fit them on your own experience. If you don't have enough inner experience, it's very easy to get messed up. Even when they simply ask you a question, the way they frame the question already embodies a certain viewpoint. And that viewpoint may be questionable.

So keep your meditation a private affair. After all, the suffering you're causing yourself is a private affair, something nobody else can see. Even when we live together day in and day out, each of us is making a lot of decisions that nobody else here will know. We may see some of the outside effects, but the actual experience of suffering — your suffering, your pain: You're the only person who can feel it. And you're the only person who can know which little decisions you make from moment to moment to moment. That's what you want to learn how to observe.

So try to develop your inner sensitivity as much as you can, so that you can make sure your decisions are going in the right direction. The intentional element here is to try to minimize suffering as much as possible.

This is why breath meditation relates directly to the sublime attitudes we chant every evening. This is your front row seat on the question of how to bring about more happiness. “May all living beings be happy”: All living beings are out there, but *you’re* one of them, too, *in here*. This is the being you have the most direct impact on. So if you learn how to be kind to yourself in the way you breathe, it’s going to be easier to be kind to other people. If you see that there’s some stress and suffering inside, have some compassion for yourself. Try to breathe in a way, try to relate to the breath in a way, that minimizes that stress. When you learn compassion for yourself inside like this, it’s a lot easier to feel compassion for others outside.

The same with empathetic joy and equanimity: When the breath is going well, appreciate it. Enjoy it. As for the uncomfortable things in the breath that you can’t change, you’ve just got to watch them for a while. The word for equanimity — *upekkha* — actually relates to that quality of just watching, looking on. In other words, you see that this may not yet be the time to do anything, but you never know when the situation will change, so you just keep watching, watching, watching, until you detect things. And even here the breath helps a lot. It gives you a foundation from which to watch.

As you’re staying with the breath, you’re in the present moment. Simply being with the sensation of breathing helps pull you out of a lot of your thoughts, that ongoing committee discussion in the mind. If you’re with the breath, you’re like an outside observer on the committee meeting. You’re not necessarily pushed around by the voices in the committee. In that way, you’re in a better position to see, “Is this the time to exercise goodwill? Or is it more the time to exercise equanimity, compassion, or empathetic joy?”

So these two types of meditation — the meditation that develops the sublime attitudes and the meditation on the breath — really come together like this. The breath gives you practice in the proper attitudes and puts you in a position where you can see which of these four attitudes is appropriate at any one time, always taking your inner experience of stress — something you’re most intimately related to — as your touchstone. That way, your knowledge is not just words. There’s a direct experience underlying it all. As your skill is being developed, you’re growing more sensitive to what that experience is, and more honest with yourself about where you’re still causing yourself stress.

Your experience of stress is your only proof of whether the meditation is working, and even then it’s reliable only if you’re honest with yourself. You may

want to look for an outside authority to verify things for you, but that leads to the question of who out there is awakened, who is not. You may have some ideas, you may have some intuitions, but you can't really prove anything about what's going on outside. Your only real proof is what lies inside. And until you make the inner proof as clear and as honest as possible, you'll have no proof about anything at all.

So this inner sensitivity, something totally private to you, is what you're trying to develop here. That's where you start; that's what helps keep you on the path.

And of course, this sensitivity doesn't necessarily have to be here only while you're sitting and meditating. Try to keep in touch throughout the day with your inner experience of what you're doing and what stress is or is not arising as a result of what you're doing, the little choices you make inside. Try to carry that awareness around as much as you can, in all your activities. Make that your first priority. When you act, act from that point. When you speak, speak from that point. When you think, think from that point.

In that way the meditation becomes timeless. Ajaan Fuang once made the comment that our lives are often chopped up into little times: time to eat, time to talk, time to go here, go there, do this, do that. Instead of having more time when life has more times like this, everything gets chopped up into little tiny pieces and becomes less. But when you make this inner sensitivity as continuous as possible — you breathe in, let the body breathe out if it wants to, but you don't have to force the breath out; breathe in again, breathe in again — that inner sense of wellbeing can grow. Then as you carry it through the day, it becomes solid. It may take time to focus on it, time to get a sense of what helps it, what doesn't help it. But the sense of inner refreshment that comes: You want that to be as continuous as possible. The more continuous it is, the more strength it develops. The more resilient it becomes, the more you can rely on it, even in very difficult situations. This involves unlearning some old habits. Society often teaches us to give all our attention to things outside. What happens of course is that we lose touch with our own inner sensitivity. We become strangers to ourselves.

So reintroduce yourself to this inner sensitivity. Open up this area of your awareness, and be as sensitive to it as possible. In that way the meditation will grow in an organic way — not from words imposed outside, or ideas imposed from how you understand the words outside, but from a direct experience of

what's actually going on inside. What works and what doesn't work, what's skillful, what's not, where there's stress, where there is no stress: These are the questions that only you can observe and only you can know. And they can be answered only by a very honest sensitivity that's always willing to learn more.

One Point, Two Points, Many Points

August 18, 2007

Ajaan Lee sometimes talks about *not* being aware of the breath in the whole body. He sometimes recommends focusing on one spot and just staying right there. Some people, he says, find it too distracting to deal with the breath sensations in the different parts of the body. As you're thinking about your hand, your arm, or your leg, other thoughts related to hands, arms, and legs might sneak in and carry you off someplace else.

He compares this to starting an orchard. If you plant your whole orchard all at once, using all your resources, you may find that you've overextended yourself. You're faced with a drought for several days, the trees all die, and you end up with nothing. In cases like that, it's smarter to start out with one little area and to focus on planting just that, caring for that. Say you plant a mango tree. You care for it for a couple years, and then when they give their first crop of mangoes, you collect the seeds and plant them. The same with the second crop. That way you gradually enlarge your orchard until you fill your whole plot of land.

So if you find that focusing on the breath here and there in the beginning of the meditation gets you distracted, just focus down on one spot and stay right there. Tell yourself: You're not going anywhere else. You may want to use the word *buddho* to help keep things under control. But just use one spot in the body: It might be right between your eyes, the middle of the forehead, wherever you feel is closest to the center of your awareness in the body. You stare right down, right there.

The one warning is that you not tighten up around that spot. Think of the area as being open and free flowing. In other words, the blood can flow in, the blood can flow out. Energy flows in, energy flows out, but you are not moving. You're going to stay right here. No matter what happens, you're going to stay right in this one little spot. That can gather the mind together and keep it there. You're not trying to take care of too many things at once.

Other people find that one spot is not enough. In that case, you might want to try two spots. There was an old schoolteacher I knew who had come to

meditation late in life. After she retired, she went to stay at Wat Asokaram. She found that the easiest way to get her mind down — she told me once, well before I was ordained — was to focus on two spots: one right between the eyes, the other at the base of the spine. She'd try to keep both spots going at once. In her case, she said, it was like connecting the two poles of a battery. As soon as the two poles were connected, things lit up inside. That enabled her to get the mind into concentration really quickly.

What all this shows is that concentration is an individual matter. Different people find that their minds settle down in different ways. And there's room in the practice of concentration for you to experiment and see what works for you. There's no one ideal method that's going to suit everybody, and the whole purpose of the concentration is for the mind to settle down with something it likes, something it finds interesting.

The *iddhipada*, or bases for success, basically say that concentration will succeed by stressing one of four different qualities. For some people, it's fired by desire. For others, persistence, the energy of stick-to-it-iveness. Other people find that concentration works best when it's based on the quality of intent, when you dive in and give it your entire attention. Other people find that analysis works. It's by analyzing the breath, by making it interesting — and finding that it really is interesting, the way the breath energy flows in the body, how it can be very different from what you might expect, by playing with it, by experimenting with it — that you find yourself absorbed in the present. Not because you're forcing yourself to be there, but simply because you get interested, just as you can get absorbed, say, in painting a picture.

As a child I used to find that drawing would have me absorbed for hours. I'd be working on a drawing and I'd have no sense of the passage of time. It'd be time for dinner before I knew it. And the same can work in your meditation as you learn to analyze the breath. You pull yourself into the present moment not with any force, but simply through the power of your curiosity.

Some people, though, find that analyzing things like this gets them distracted: You start thinking about the breath, and then you start thinking about your stomach, and then about the doctor who looked after your stomach, and all of a sudden you find yourself thirty miles away. In that case your meditation may succeed based either on the desire to stay here, or the effort to stay focused on just one spot, or being intent on one spot, or on two spots, whatever you find works.

So there's room for experimentation; there's room for you to learn what works for you. Keep this in mind as you practice. Sometimes you've got to use your ingenuity. As Ajaan Fuang once noted, all the elements in really well-balanced concentration are there in the seven steps in Ajaan Lee's instructions. The problem is simply that different people will find different steps to be the ones that really pull them in. Once they've been pulled in by one of the steps, they've got to balance out the other ones.

Ajaan Lee talks about finding your one spot in the body and staying focused there, but some people miss this step because it comes after the steps that tell you to explore the breath throughout the body. But the steps don't have to be done in sequential order. Think of them as different component factors of concentration. You may have to start out with just the one spot. Once that's established, you can develop the other components. In other words, you stay focused in your one spot and then see how it's related to the area right around it. Then radiating out from there, you look at the areas right around that, until you've got the whole body in your frame of awareness, even though you're still really staring down on the one spot. You can't help but be aware of the body. In other words, you don't totally blank out the rest of the body. After all, the purpose of concentration is to be aware all around as a basis for discernment. Discernment can arise only when you're aware all around. If your concentration is the sort that blocks things out, it's not going to be a good basis for discernment. You won't see unexpected connections. You'll have huge blind spots in your range of awareness where all kinds of things can hide.

So one way to start is to go right for one spot and then gradually expand from there. But if you find that too confining, if the mind rebels against being forced into one spot, you can have it range around your body. Notice how the breath feels in the toes, how it feels in the fingers, how it feels in the arms and the back, how your posture effects the breath, how your breath effects the posture. In other words, use the meditation as an opportunity to explore.

This is one of the good things about the breath as a focal point for meditation. You can use it both as an object to stare at and as an object to analyze. If you find that the mind needs more tranquility before it's going to get anywhere, okay, you can just settle down and be very, very still. It's almost like you're not even watching the breath. You're more focused on the direction in which your awareness is beamed. You're preoccupied with just keeping the beam steady. The one danger you have to watch out for there, of course, is that you

might clamp down on the blood circulation in that spot. So watch out for that. Allow things to come in and go out, but you stay at that one spot as consistently as possible.

But as for the connections you can see when you use the breath as an object for discernment, they're infinite. We were talking earlier this morning about name and form and how they play a role in the arising of suffering. Well, they also play a role in the path leading to the end of suffering. You've got form, which is the form of the body, the four great elements, and the breath is the most prominent element. You've got perception: whatever perceptions you have of the breath, whatever ways you have of conceiving the breath. That's an effective way of getting the mind to settle down: simply by holding that perception in mind. You pay attention, which is another element of form. You've got the intention to stay. And then you've got the feeling that arises when you try to create a feeling of ease. In other words, instead of allowing these things to happen willy-nilly, you try to bring as much awareness and clarity to how they function in bringing the mind to stillness.

So these elements — which if left to their own devices based on ignorance would lead to suffering: You're now playing with them, all the while being very aware of how they interact. This is one of the best ways of learning their interactions: by playing with them. You adjust your attention or your intention and see what happens to the feeling. You change your perception, and see what effect it has on the mind.

What we're doing is to take the basic causes of suffering and to bring as much awareness to them as possible — specifically awareness in the form of the four noble truths: Where is there stress, what are you doing that's causing stress, and what can you change to make the stress go away? You start with blatant levels of stress related to how you're sitting here breathing, trying to get the mind to settle down. And then from there, you grow sensitive to levels that are more and more subtle.

You're here right where all the action is. It's simply a matter for you individually to figure out exactly where you can get your first handle on these issues. Establish that as your beachhead, and then from there your understanding will begin to spread out. There will come times in the meditation when you begin to think that just being very still right here is kind of stupid. Nothing is going to happen. And you wonder what else is there to do next. Well, ask yourself: Who

says that it's stupid? Why do you need to push the "what's next"? Those are perceptions right there. Right there you've got some issues you can work through.

Everything you need to know for the purpose of putting an end to suffering is right here. Just bring a lot of alertness to it. A lot of mindfulness to it. And notice what works for you in getting the mind to settle down. That's how insight arises, by seeing what works. That's the way the Buddha tested all of his insights: Did they work? In other words, he was looking for pragmatic truth, the knowledge that would make a difference. As for truths that wouldn't make a difference, he just put them aside. He was very single-minded in his quest. Whatever was necessary for putting an end to suffering, he focused on that. Whatever wasn't necessary, he might know it but he didn't let it clutter up his mind.

As he said in describing his Awakening, he learned the equivalent of the leaves of the forest. What he brought out to teach — in terms of focusing on the issue of suffering, its cause, its end, and the path to its end: That's just like a handful of leaves. But it's precisely the handful you need. If you were to make a comparison with medicine, there can be lots of medicine in the forest, but just this one handful is what you need for your specific disease. As for the other leaves, if they're not helpful for your disease, why bother with them right now? The mind has this disease of ignorance, craving, greed, anger and delusion. And if we don't take care of it, it's going to fester, going to cause a lot of suffering for a long time to come. So focus on the leaves that will cure it. As for the other leaves in the forest, you can pay attention to them after you've got this specific disease cured.

So everything you need to know is right here. It's simply a matter of paying attention. See which perceptions work, which perceptions don't work, which ways of paying attention work, and which ones don't, which intentions work, and which don't. Just by exploring these issues, you can learn an awful lot about the mind — and make a big change in the mind as well.

The Stairway Up

April 28, 2004

Once, soon after I had first met Ajaan Fuang, I had a dream. In the dream I was visiting Ajaan Lee's monastery. I had never been there, but in the dream they had a big museum several stories high. I had the choice to climb the stairway or to climb a ladder up on the side of the building, going straight to the top floor, and I chose the ladder. I wanted to go straight up to the top. But as I was climbing, the ladder fell down. Fortunately I was caught. The problem was that the ladder wasn't leaning against anything solid. At the end of the dream I found myself at the door again, having to contemplate going up the stairway. That's when I woke up.

And that's pretty much a story of how my practice started: A lot of things happened very quickly those first couple of weeks with Ajaan Fuang but then they all unraveled, and I had to start back at the beginning, step by step by step. This can sometimes be discouraging. It happens to all meditators. Sometimes by fluke we happen to hit something very advanced — or at least it seems to be very advanced — in the meditation and then it all unravels right before our eyes. At first it can be encouraging, but ultimately it turns discouraging as we see the defilements we're still living with in our minds — that those quick, flashy experiences didn't actually make much of an impact.

The follow-up work seems a lot less glamorous, and a lot of people give up right there. But it's important that you don't give up and that you don't look down on the situation where you are. Don't get discouraged, because wherever you go, those are the issues you have to deal with, that's the situation you have to address. If you don't deal with it now, you have to come back to that same situation all over again, and sometimes it gets worse. So the proper attitude is that whatever issues arise in the meditation, those are the ones you have to deal with. Don't compare them with where you've been before in the meditation, or with the issues you'd like to be dealing with now, or where you want the meditation to go.

Most of us would like to be magically beamed up to a higher level of concentration or a higher level of insight. But it's often the case that our refusal to look at the situation in our minds right now is what's preventing concentration and insight from arising. So look at what you've got. Look at where you are. Don't pass judgment as to whether the problem you're facing is elementary or advanced. It's the problem you're facing. It's the problem that has to be dealt with. Bring all your powers of attention to bear right there.

And be glad that you've got the opportunity to practice. Don't view it as drudgery. A lot of people are in situations where they have no inclination, have no idea what the practice is about. Or they may have an idea and the inclination but they don't have the opportunity. Here we have the opportunity. We've got the inclination. We have some idea of what the problem is all about. These opportunities are rare to find.

So the teaching on acceptance means accepting where you are. It doesn't mean that you accept that you're going to *stay* there forever. You simply accept that this is the situation you're facing right now. Whether it's something you like or not, whether you find yourself attracted to it or not, that's not the issue. The issue is: Are you willing to work with what you've got?

That willingness is an important element in all levels of practice. It starts with our willingness to help other people, and goes on with our willingness to practice the precepts. This volunteer spirit is an important part of training the mind. That's what it's all about: realizing that you've got to put energy into it if you're going to get anything out of it. When you're willing to take that first step, make that first gift of your energy, that's where the practice starts to grow. Without that attitude, it doesn't go anywhere. All we can think of is what we'd like to get out of the meditation, but before you can *get* anything you have to *give*.

As for generosity, sometimes people look at what they've got and they'd like to be able to give much more. They'd like to make a more impressive offering, but their means are limited. So they have to content themselves with giving limited gifts to begin with, but the momentum builds on that.

Sometimes the little gifts bring the greatest reward. Ajaan Fuang liked to tell the story of a man and his wife who had only one upper cloth between them. They each had a cloth to cover the lower parts of their bodies, but only one cloth between them to cover the upper parts of their bodies. That was back in the days in India when you didn't go out of your house unless you had two pieces of cloth around you: one wrapped around your waist, the other over your shoulders.

Because they only had one upper cloth between them, they'd have to leave the house at separate times. If one was going out, the other had to stay at home. They were that poor.

One night they heard that the Buddha was going to be giving a talk, so they agreed that the husband should be the one to go. The talk was basically on the rewards of generosity. The husband kept sitting there thinking, "This is why I'm so poor. I haven't been generous. What have I got to give? Nothing. All I have is this one cloth, and if I give this I won't be able to go anywhere. But if I don't give this, what can I give? I won't be able to give anything at all." So he battled back and forth, back and forth, back and forth in his mind for hours, and the Buddha, noting what was going on, just kept on talking and talking on generosity. It was originally supposed to be a short Dhamma talk, but it went on and on and on until midnight. The king was in the audience, lots of people were in the audience, and they were wondering why the Dhamma talk was going on for so long.

Finally around midnight the man stood up shouting, "Victory! Victory!" He had overcome his stinginess. He was going to give the cloth to the Buddha, so he went down and gave the cloth. People in the audience wondered who this was, and why he was shouting "Victory." When they learned of his poverty, they were very impressed. The king said, "Okay, I'll give him another cloth and other things in addition" — a cloth and a horse and an elephant, all kinds of stuff. One of each.

And because the man was on a roll, a generosity roll, he gave all those things to the Buddha, too. So the king upped the ante — gave him two of each. The man gave all of that. The king kept doubling: four, eight, finally sixteen. At that point the man decided to keep eight of each of these things — eight pieces of gold, eight pieces of silver, eight pieces of cloth, eight horses, eight elephants. He gave the other eight to the Buddha and went home with his remaining eight. The lesson of the story is that a small gift by a person of little means translates into a lot more in terms of its rewards than a large gift from someone of large means, because the first gift requires more of a sacrifice.

The same principle applies in the meditation. When things aren't going well, you have to make a sacrifice of your pride, a sacrifice of your likes and dislikes, and get down to dealing with what's actually happening in the mind. Only when you're able to make that sacrifice can the rewards come. In the beginning they may not be all that impressive. You may not get a piece of gold, a piece of silver,

an elephant or whatever, but you do make a step, you see a slight change in the mind. That's much better than just sitting around being discouraged.

So whatever the issues you're facing in your meditation, be content to deal with them, because those are the real issues, the genuine issues you've got to face. They may not stack up against the things you've read about or the things you've experienced in the past, but a little solid progress is much more valuable than all the quick and flashy special effects out there in the world.

Ajaan Fuang sometimes had students who would come to sit and meditate with him for the first time and gain visions of their past lives or of heavenly beings. Some of his older students felt jealous and discouraged by that. Here they'd been sitting and meditating for months with nothing special happening, and this person comes in and has all kinds of interesting things going on all at once. It often happened, though, that the quick and flashy students didn't last very long. When the visions stopped, when there was no more entertainment, they left. It's the steady progress that makes all the difference, that turns out to be the winner in the end.

So sacrifice whatever attitudes get in the way of looking at the issues staring you right in the face, because those are the genuine article. They're right here. They're not abstractions. We can sit around and think about Dhamma abstractions from dawn to dusk and dusk to dawn, but the problems in the mind aren't composed of abstractions. They're not composed of memories. They're composed of movements in the mind right now. Look at what the mind is doing, how it moves. Can you change the way it moves?

You've got to poke around in what's actually going on in your mind to see which parts of the present are made of elastic and which parts are made of steel — in other words, the things you can change and the things you can't. There will be drudgery and there will be mistakes, but these are the things you learn from. This is the kind of knowledge that really makes a difference in the mind, because this is how you develop your sensitivity, how you get a sense of how to balance excessive desire with lack of desire, how to balance excessive effort with lack of effort, and all the other balancing acts that need to be done in the meditation. You learn from falling down and picking yourself up again. And you do this not by thinking about the ideal of balance, but by gaining an intuitive feel for it by poking at this, poking at that, leaning this way, leaning that. Whatever the attitude that's coming up in the mind — the discouragement, the frustration, the irritation, whatever — you poke at it. You don't necessarily have to believe it.

And whatever positive attitudes come up in the mind, no matter how small they might seem, those are what you've got to work with. After all, redwood trees come from tiny seeds. If you step on them, they never have a chance to grow. But if you look at them carefully, you can recognize them, you can see that they're different from weed seeds. That gives you an idea of what you've got to encourage and what you've got to discourage in the mind, what you've got to cultivate and what you've got to cut out, uproot.

So gardening like this may not be glamorous work and it may not be flashy, but this is how all genuine work is done in this world. This is how things come to blossom. You poke around bit by bit by bit, paying careful attention, making mistakes and learning from them. That's the sort of work that gets solid results, results that build on a good solid foundation, where you take the stairway and it does ultimately get you up to the top floor — with no danger of crashing down.

Conceit

January 19, 2007

Conceit is one of those qualities we all have — and it's a slippery friend. There are times when it's useful, as in that passage where Ananda teaches a nun that we practice to overcome conceit and yet we have to use conceit in the practice. The example he gives is that when you hear of someone who has put an end to suffering, has made it all the way to the goal, you can reflect, "That person is a human being; I'm a human being. That person can do it; so can I." To that extent, you need conceit in the practice. If you believe that you can't do the practice, or if it seems way beyond you, you end up giving up, you set your sights low. And as we all know, you never hit higher than you aim. So to that extent, conceit is helpful.

But it has its fangs. Ajaan Maha Boowa calls it the "fangs of ignorance" when you have the conceit that, "Well, this is going to be easy," and you get careless, complacent. And conceit has another side as well. The Buddha talks about comparing yourself to other people: thinking that you're better than they are, or equal to them, or worse than they are. All of these comparisons count as conceit. In other words, the idea "I am this," "I am that" gets brought into every issue, and this is where it grows fangs: "I'm really good at everything, therefore I'm going to be good at this," and you get careless. Or you may think, "I'm not up to this. This is beyond me," and you give up. You make the practice harder than it has to be. So it's a fine line, realizing where conceit is going to be helpful and where it's going to bite.

First, there's the issue of confidence. On the one hand, it's important to realize that this path you're on is a hard path to follow, so you can't go on the complacent assumption that, "This is going to be easy for me." On the other hand, you don't want to discourage yourself with the thought, "It's going to be impossible for me." The problem isn't the path, or how easy or hard it is. It's the *me* in there. That's the fangs. So try to put that word aside as much as you can. Remind yourself simply, "This is what has to be done." "Is it going to kill you?" "Well, no." "Then you can do it."

That's what Ajaan Fuang said to me once. One evening, after a long day of work, he told me to sit up all night. This was very early on in my time with him, and I was dumb enough to say, "I don't think I can do that." He looked at me and said, "Is it going to kill you?" "Well, no." "Then you can do it." This didn't mean that it wasn't going to be hard. It *was* hard, but after all, this is a hard practice. It goes against all our inclinations. We like our greed. We like our anger, sometimes. We like our delusions, and yet all these things have to be put aside, let go of as we practice. But it's within human capability to do this. Even if you do die in the practice, it's a good way to die. It's better than dying without having accomplished anything or dying doing something really stupid.

So try to think in those terms: Realize that even though it's hard, this is part of being a good friend to yourself. One of the definitions of a good friend is someone who is able to give what's hard to give, to do what's hard to do, to endure what's hard to endure. If you meet friends like that, associate with them. Value them. Treasure them. These are the people you really want as your friends. And you want to be able to make yourself your own best friend in just the same way.

Ask yourself, "What's hard for you to give, and yet something that's actually a burden for you?" Forgiveness is one thing. It's funny how sometimes material things are easy to give, but forgiveness, which is totally free, can be very hard. Just go down the list of the people in your life who you find it hard to forgive, and try it: Forgive them. Try not to carry a grudge and you'll find that that's a really good gift to give to yourself.

Do what is hard to do. Meditate longer than you might want to. Do walking meditation longer than you might want to. Put more effort into the practice than you want to, and you'll find that you benefit. This ties in with enduring what's hard to endure. Pain is hard to endure. Other people's dislike is hard to endure. Well, learn to endure it. It's not going to kill you. This doesn't mean that you sit there and grit your teeth through the pain. Learn to use your wisdom. As Ajaan Chah once said, if you could gain Awakening simply by endurance, chickens would have attained Awakening a long time ago — they can sit for really long hours. You have to use your wisdom. When something seems burdensome, why is it burdensome? Exactly what is it placing a burden on? And why do you want to identify with what's being burdened? Can you learn *not* to identify with it?

A good way to learn these lessons is to force yourself into situations where you've got to face this difficulty head on. Okay, it's there, it's a problem, and try

to use your ingenuity to get around it. It's when you're cornered that you realize that you've got to find a way out. And that you can.

So learn to be your own best friend. It's not a matter of being pessimistic or optimistic. It's a matter of learning to be heedful. Heedfulness involves an interesting combination of qualities. On the one hand, you're confident that your actions *do* make a difference, so heedfulness is not negative or pessimistic. On the other hand, you realize that there are dangers out there, dangers inside as well. There are difficulties you've got to work with. You respect those difficulties but you don't get overwhelmed by them. In other words, you've got to drop the element of conceit from your grasp. Don't bring your "*self*" into what you're doing. Don't bring "I can do this really easily" or "I can't do this at all." Just put them aside and see what you can do. Even if things don't work out well the first time, try, try, try again. This is how people grow.

One of Ajaan Fuang's terms of criticism was of someone who was "good even before he'd tried something" — in other words, the sort of person who's got it all figured out beforehand. He didn't trust people like that. At the same time, though, if he found that you were getting very pessimistic about your ability to practice, he didn't want you to stay there, either. Being overly optimistic or overly pessimistic were, as far as he was concerned, really unskillful ways of approaching the path. They're both forms of conceit. Admit that things are difficult but do what you can.

And learn to develop your discernment. Watch out for those fangs of ignorance: the "I am this" or "I am that" or "I'm not used to this," "I can't stand this," "This is hard for me." Drop the "I," the "me," and things get a lot easier.

So even though it may be hard, you can do it. The things that are hard to give, you can give. The things that are hard to do, you can do. The things that are hard to endure, you discover you can endure. It may not be easy the first time. You may find yourself running into a brick wall, but even brick walls can be battered down. They have their cracks. There are ways around them, under them, over them, through them. All you have to do is find where they are.

So learn the proper use of conceit: the confidence that, yes, you can do this; other people can do it, it's something human beings have done — you're a human being, you can do it too. Once you've got that amount of conviction, drop the "you," drop the "me," the "I," and then set to work. That right there makes it a lot easier. And this way you become your own best friend.

A Sense of Adventure

October 20, 2007

As you embark on the practice — and as you stay with the practice — it's best to think of it as a voyage of discovery. After all, the Buddha says that the goal is to see what you've never seen before, to realize what you've never realized before, to attain what you've never attained before. So you're going into the unknown. This means that you're going to have to deal with risk and uncertainty, which require an interesting mix of attitudes. On the one hand, you need a certain amount of confidence. On the other hand, you need humility. The confidence is confidence in your ability to deal with unknown factors as they arise. The humility is the realization that you can't expect everything to follow your preconceived notions. The path is going to stretch your imagination and ask more out of you than you might originally be prepared to give. So you need the confidence that Yes, you can do this and Yes, this is a good place to go. And you need the humility to realize that No, you don't know beforehand what it's going to be like. You have to be willing to learn.

Some people want to have all kinds of guarantees before they embark on this training, but you can't really guarantee anything. You can guarantee that when you reach the goal it's going to be good, but how much is that guarantee worth for someone who hasn't experienced it yet? Just one more thing to take into consideration. The Buddha, when he embarked on his quest, had no guarantee that all the sacrifice was going to be worth it, that he was going to find the deathless, or even that he was going to survive. But he had reached a point in his life where he realized that if he didn't at least try it, he would feel that his life had been wasted. And so for him it was a huge experiment. There was a lot of risk and a lot of uncertainty. And yet he was willing to take the risk and to face the uncertainty.

For us, it's not quite that drastic. We have people who've gone before. There's the question of whether we can trust them and believe them, but then look at the alternative: a life lived devoted to the pursuit of sensual pleasures, trying to squeeze happiness out of things that are going to die and that we'll have to leave

in the end — if not before the end. So at the very least you say, “Well, there’s a possibility here. Let’s give it a try.” Try to have that sense of adventure. Be open to new things and learn how to deal with uncertainties.

Earlier today we were talking about the maps for the jhanas. When you try to apply the map to your actual experience, it’s going to be uncertain for a while. You read the description of directed thought and evaluation, rapture and all, and the question is: What do those terms correspond to in your actual experience? You may have some ideas, but they may be wrong. Is that going to stop you from practicing? It shouldn’t. It should simply alert you to the fact that you’re going to be dealing in uncertainties for a while. When you place labels on your experiences, they have to be post-it notes, signposts to use in the meantime until you get a better sense of the terrain. The surest of the signposts is the one for the fourth jhana — when the in-and-out breath stops and stays stopped for the duration of that state of mind — but that’s all the way in the fourth. So how are you going to know the signposts for one, two, and three? Well, you guess for the time being and you attach a few notes here, a few notes there. And have the confidence that when you find something more certain, you’re going to be in a position to rearrange the notes if need be.

The sense of adventure also means that you may have some anticipations of what’s going to work and what things should be like in the practice. But right anticipation is not part of the path. Sometimes your anticipations can push things in the wrong direction. The Buddha’s instructions are very precise, and pretty simple, and part of us doesn’t believe anything that simple could really work. There must be some secret; there must be some way you can speed the process along. But sometimes in speeding along you derail yourself.

It’s like sharpening a knife on a stone. If you’re in too much of a hurry, you can ruin the blade. So you sit there very carefully rubbing it against the stone, rubbing it against the stone, making sure that the pressure is even all along the blade. Then you realize that you may be at this for a while. Part of the mind says, “Well, I’d like to have it done fast so I can go off and do something else.” But there also has to be another part of the mind that says, “If you try to speed it up, you could ruin it. So keep doing what you’re doing.” Even though the results don’t appear as quickly as you’d like, maybe the slow results are the ones that will be the most lasting. So you have to put your preconceived notions aside. Don’t try to skip over the steps. The Buddha does teach a sense of urgency, but

he also teaches patience. And you have to learn how to balance the two and be willing to learn new things.

This evening I was reading a study guide to some of the suttas that raised questions about different passages in the suttas that just didn't sound right to the author, or didn't seem to fit in with his preconceived notions. But there's always the question of whether our notions, rather than the passages, are wrong. There's a lot going on in the texts, maybe more than we realize. The Buddha was talking to people in a different time, with a different range of experiences. Sometimes he was talking to people with extremely unusual meditative experiences. In other words, maybe he knew what he was talking about, why he had to address that issue in that particular way. Maybe the texts are accurately reporting what he said — even though they don't fit into our preconceived notions of what the texts would be like if they were written for a modern American audience.

So what you are asked as you read the Dhamma — and as you approach the practice as a whole — is to stretch your imagination a bit. It's not the case that the Buddha will be able to prove everything to you beforehand — before you're willing to act — so that you can act with confidence and full awareness of where you're going to go and how you're going to get there. You have to be willing to live with uncertainty and to put question marks against a lot of your assumptions. Remind yourself that your assumptions are the assumptions of a person with defilement, the assumptions of a person still suffering. Perhaps it would be in your best interest to put them aside for the time being instead of demanding that everything fit into your preconceived notions of how things should be.

And you should be willing to embark on this without a 100% guarantee that everything is going to work out the way you want it to. Have a clear sense of the precariousness of your own position, of where you are right now. Where do you get your sustenance? Where does the mind gain its pleasures? Are those things solid and secure? When you go into the uncertainty of the path, are you leaving an area of true certainty and assuredness to go off into figments of someone's imagination? Or are you leaving the world of your current uncertainties to test some different uncertainties that ultimately promise something more certain than where you're staying right now?

This is why one of the basic principles in the practice is practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma — in other words, not in accordance with your preconceived notions, not in accordance with your ideas of what you

want before you're going to commit yourself to the practice. Instead of reshaping the Dhamma to fit your notions, maybe you have to reshape yourself to fit the Dhamma. There is bound to be a period of discomfort, bound to be a sense of frustration when things are not quite working out the way you wanted them to. But you need the maturity to learn how to deal with that. This is not a path for immature people. It's a path for people who know that they are in a very precarious position already, and that their ideas and assumptions are especially precarious. But the ideas and presumptions of a materialistic worldview, which is what we were brought up in, offer a very limited range of happiness, whereas the Dhamma offers a lot more. It's simply up to us to decide whether we're willing to make the sacrifices and take the risk to see if the "more" is a reality, if what the Buddha had to say is true.

On the Path of the Breath

February 11, 2008

Once the Buddha was extolling the advantages of breath meditation, the benefits that could be derived from keeping the breath in mind, and one of the monks said, “I already do breath meditation.” So the Buddha asked him, “What kind of breath meditation do you do?” And the monk replied, “I sit breathing, putting away any desires for the past or future, and any irritation in the present moment” — i.e., developing a sense of equanimity for what’s arising and passing away right here and now. And that was it: That was his method. The Buddha responded, “Well, that *is* a form of breath meditation. I don’t say that it’s not, but that’s not how you get the most benefit out of the breath.”

So he proceeded to teach breath meditation in a much fuller way. And it’s important to look carefully at how the Buddha taught breath meditation, because you begin to realize how proactive his method was. You also realize that many of the steps contained in his method are more like questions. He said, “Do this,” but without fully explaining how you might go about doing it, which means that you have to test and explore.

The first two steps are exercises for gaining practice in discerning the breath — discerning when it’s long, discerning when it’s short — to help sensitize you to how the breath feels. When you do that, you begin to notice which kind of breathing feels best. He simply mentions long or short, but there are other qualities you can look for as well: deep or shallow, heavy or light, fast or slow. In other words, you want to get in touch with the physical sensations of the breath. When you breathe in, where do you feel the sensation of breathing? When you breathe out, where do you feel it? The Buddha doesn’t say that you have to focus on any particular point. He simply says, “Bring mindfulness to the fore.” In other words, be very clear about what you’re keeping in mind, which is the meaning of mindfulness. To have a purpose in mind, what you’re planning to do, and then your ability to remember that: That’s mindfulness. As for actually watching what’s going on, that’s called alertness. You need both qualities, but it helps to know which is which.

Because the Buddha doesn't say where in the body you have to focus, you can ask yourself, when you breathe in, where you actually feel it. Put aside your preconceived notions of where you *should* be feeling it: Where do you actually feel the breath? Where is it comfortable; where is it uncomfortable? From those steps in learning how to sensitize yourself to the breathing, the Buddha then moves on to a whole series of trainings in which you have to learn how to do something. You *will* something to happen.

This is where the breath meditation gets more proactive. The first training — which is the third step — is to learn how to breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body. In other words, you try to create an expansive state of mind. You're conscious of the breath but you're also trying to be aware of the body as a whole, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes. The question is: How do you do that? Some people find it very easy to go straight to the whole body. Other people have to work gradually up to it. One way of doing that is to go through the body section by section, noticing how the different parts of the body feel as you breathe in, how they feel as you breathe out. And to help yourself along, you might try making the breath more comfortable wherever you focus. For example, as you focus on the back of the neck, notice: Is there tension there? When you breathe in do you build up tension there? When you breathe out are you holding on to tension? What can you do to relax it?

This is actually moving into the fourth step, which is to calm what's called "bodily fabrication": the effect of breath on the sensation of the body. But you can combine the two steps. As you go through the body, working up to this full body awareness, you can also learn how to calm the breath so that the sensation of breathing feels good. You begin to realize that the breathing is not just a process that you feel in one or two points in the body. The entire body is involved in the breathing process, or it *can* be involved in the breathing process. The more it becomes a whole-body process, the more refreshing it feels.

This moves on to steps five and six: training yourself to breathe in and out with a sense of refreshment, with a sense of ease and pleasure. You build up to these steps as you try to find which rhythm of breathing is best for each part of the body until you're ready to settle down at one spot. Then think of your awareness spreading from that spot to fill the whole body. Then you go back again and follow the strict order of the steps, which is, once you're aware of the whole body, to allow the sensations of the breathing to calm down.

You begin to notice that your ideas about the breath will have an effect on how calm it can get. You can perceive the breath in different ways. For instance, you can hold in mind the perception that it's a whole-body process. Think of the breath coming in and out every pore of the skin. And there is an oxygen exchange happening at the skin. The more wide open your pores, the more oxygen gets exchanged. If you think of the skin as being wide open, the muscles of the rib cage can do less work. Just make the mind still and hold that perception in place: The breath can come in and go out from any direction through all the parts of your body, all the pores of your skin. It all connects on its own, without your having to massage it through the body.

You'll notice that there are subtle sensations in the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out, that correspond to the grosser sensations of the movement of the rib cage, the movement of the diaphragm. Allow those subtle sensations to blend together in a way that feels harmonious. Think of every part of the body being connected, all the energy channels in the body being connected, so that the breath energy spreads through them instantly and automatically, independently of the in-and-out breath, without your having to do anything to breathe it in or out. Here you're using one of the aggregates, the aggregate of perception, to help calm the breath down. And you notice that it does also induce a sense of *piti*, which is usually translated as "rapture," although in some cases it's not quite as strong as what we would ordinarily call "rapture." It's more a sense of refreshment. The body feels full, satisfied. It's as if every little cell in the body is getting to breathe to its heart's content, and is not getting squeezed by the other cells in the process. A sense of ease will come along with this. Once the body has been really refreshed in this way, things will begin to calm down even further.

This is where you get sensitive to what the Buddha calls mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. You've already noticed that changing the perception of how you breathe will have an effect on the breathing process and the feelings that arise from the breathing process. It also has an effect on the mind. It calms things down. So you can continue exploring exactly which perceptions help to calm the mind down even further.

What you're doing here is learning both calm and insight at the same time. The Buddha never treats these two qualities of mind as diametrically opposed. He points out that they can develop separately, but ideally they should be working together. As you calm things down mindfully, you at the same time gain insight into the workings of the mind. Here you begin to see, on the one hand,

the impact the breathing can have on the mind. The more soothing the breath becomes, the more the mind is willing to settle down in the present and feel soothed by it. At the same time, you see the impact of the mind on the breath. The way you perceive the breath is going to change the way the body actually breathes. Your mental picture of the breath, of the breathing process, will have an impact on which parts of the body actually get involved in the breathing process.

As things grow more and more calm, they lead to a point where you can sit here just looking at awareness — the awareness of the mind itself as it's watching the breath. This is an important ability in the meditation: learning how to observe the mind. It's almost as if there are two minds: the mind being observed and the mind doing the observing. You can watch the state of the mind as it stays with the breath. Then you begin to notice that sometimes it's steady and sometimes it's not. Sometimes it can maintain its concentration; sometimes it can't. Sometimes it feels refreshed and gladdened by doing the meditation; other times it feels like the meditation is more of a chore, when you're just going through the motions. You want to learn how to read your mind in this way. Once you can read it, you can then learn to provide it with whatever it needs.

For instance, how do you gladden the mind when it's feeling a little bit down, a little bit bored by the process? What can you do to make it more interesting? The analogy the Buddha gives is of an intelligent cook working in the palace for a prince. Now to get to be a cook working for a prince, you have to be sensitive to what the prince likes. The prince isn't going to come down to the kitchen and say, "Hey, buddy, tomorrow I'd like fried chicken," or "Tomorrow I'd like tofu." The prince will sit there at his table and he'll reach for this food and not reach for that food, take a lot of this and take only a little bit of that. So you've got to notice that. You have to pick up on the signs the prince is sending. Whether he's sending them consciously or not, you want to notice them. And then, when you can read his signs, you can anticipate his wants every day.

As King Asoka once said in one of his edicts that if the people who worked for him were going to please him, they had to know what he wanted even before he knew. You have to learn how to be that quick at reading your own mind. What does the mind need right now? What is it going to need with the next breath? Sometimes it gets bored with the breath, so you can give it other things to think about. You can develop qualities of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity. You can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. All of these are valid topics of meditation. They're there to inspire the mind, to gladden

the heart. You can think about the good times you've been generous in the past, when you didn't really have to share something but you felt moved to share. Or of the times you could have gotten away with harming somebody or taking something away from them, but you didn't. Think about those times. They help bring joy to the practice. In other words, like the cook, you learn how to read your mind and then provide it with whatever food it needs.

The same with the issue of steadying the mind: When the mind is feeling kind of wobbly, how do you get it fully and firmly fixed here in the present moment? You might want to go back and review some of the steps in the meditation: Which ones are you forgetting? Have you forgotten to stay with the whole body? Have you forgotten how to give rise to a sense of rapture, refreshment? Well, go back and do those things. Or you might be able to change the way you perceive the breathing. Think of the breath going down into your bones. Focus on the breathing sensations in your hands and feet. Some people find that focusing on one spot at a time is not enough to keep them really transfixed, so give yourself two spots.

I knew an old woman in Thailand when I was first getting involved in meditation. She was a retired schoolteacher and she said that one of the quickest ways of getting the mind to settle down and stay really focused in the present moment was to focus on the sensations in the head and the sensations at the base of the spine at the same time. Think of those as two breathing centers. And you may find that the effort involved in keeping two things going at once — thinking of a line connecting the two to make it a single sensation — really steadies the mind, focuses it, gets it to settle down and stay still.

The next step the Buddha recommends is learning how to release the mind. Here he's not talking about the ultimate release, but simply about how you refine your concentration. One of the important ways of gaining insight while you're in the process of developing concentration is to be able to notice the differences among the various levels of concentration as you go through them. Sometimes you settle down and you're still sort of hovering around the breath as you try to adjust it. Other times you can let yourself simply dive into the breath, to be bathed by the breathing, without having to analyze much at all. What you've done is that you've moved from using directed thought and evaluation to help with the concentration to the point where you don't need them anymore. You can let them go. There's a much greater sense of refreshment that comes, a greater sense of fullness, as you're one with the breath as opposed to hovering

protectively outside. That's one way of releasing the mind. Then you can compare which state is more easeful, which state has more stress. And then again you can provide the mind with what it needs.

Once you've learned these ways of dealing with the breath, the workings of your mind become a lot more transparent, just as the breath element in the body becomes more transparent. That's when you're ready to take the work of insight even deeper, seeing the inconstancy of anything that's intended, whether it's physical or mental — anything that's fabricated in any way at all, whether it's a bodily fabrication or a mental fabrication. No matter how easeful and refreshing and stable the mind in concentration may be, there's still a slight instability, a slight wavering you can detect. And as the mind develops a sense of dispassion for everything intentional, it grows disenchanted. It's had enough of this. That's when it's really ready to let go — i.e., it loses interest in fabricating these fabrications, and so they stop. That's when everything gets relinquished, including the path.

This is how you can get great benefit, great rewards out of the practice of breath meditation. It's not simply a means for calming the mind down. The breath itself becomes a way of understanding the process of fabrication in both body and mind. And it ultimately allows you to develop a sense of dispassion, not because you come into the meditation with a negative attitude, but because you've learned how to outgrow the exercises that the Buddha has set out for you. It's like a child outgrowing a game. You've played the game enough so that you know everything the game has to offer. You've mastered all the challenges and are ready for something more. So the dispassion here is more like the dispassion that happens when you naturally grow up, when you mature. It's the dispassion that comes when you realize there must be something better.

You sometimes hear that the point of meditation is to learn simply to accept things as they are and not to be too demanding of what you need to be happy. That principle works on an outside level, teaching contentment with your external situation, but it doesn't work on the inside level. The Buddha said that he gained Awakening by *not* resting content with the state of his mind. On the inner level, he said to notice what things can provide what level of happiness, and to see how far you can push this process of fabrication. Because that's what you're doing as you breathe in this way: You're exploring the potentials for bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication to see how far they can go. Once you've explored their limits, you want something better. You realize that

you can't look to fabrication, to these acts of intention, for true happiness any further. You've got to go deeper. You've got to learn how to abandon even these skillful intentions.

What this means is that you maintain a high standard for what it means to be happy. In fact, you heighten your standards for what's going to count as true happiness as you grow in the practice. You begin to realize that in the past you've been looking in the wrong place. You've been settling for a crude and unreliable happiness. You've been looking for all your happiness in things that are fabricated. Is it possible for there to be happiness in something totally unfabricated, totally unintended? You look for that — something that lies even beyond the intentions of equanimity, the intentions of calm or stillness, the intentions of insight. You can't get to that level without having developed these other skills, because these are the skills that refine your powers of awareness. They're not taking you to a place that you could create, which is what you've been doing all along, but they *are* taking you to a dimension you couldn't have found without having created the creations. The act of creation sensitizes you, and as you get more refined in your skill, it clears away a lot of the static in your experience of the present. It sensitizes you to very, very subtle things.

It's like tuning in on a radio. The more sensitive your ear, the more you can tell whether you're tuned into the radio station very precisely or you're off a little bit. If you're off a little bit, there's going to be static, interference. So you keep tuning in, tuning in, as your ear gets better and better. You don't want even the least little bit of static. And that's how you get right on target.

This is how the breath leads you all the way to nibbana. Of course the breath doesn't do that itself. But if you follow the Buddha's steps, learning how to master the steps he recommends for you to experiment and explore, the breath does become a path. It's a path happening right here all the time. So try to take advantage of what's right here and see how far you can go.

A Post by the Ocean

September 21, 2007

We live in a stormy world, a world of constant change. As in that passage we chanted just now about aging, illness, death, and separation — which, when you think about these things only that far, gets pretty depressing. But fortunately we don't have to think about these things only that far. We can think a little further. As in the other chant: "May I be happy." The Buddha has us respect that wish for true happiness. And he points out the way to true happiness, which is through our own actions. That's the part of the first chant that says, "I'm the owner of my actions, heir to my actions." This is what we can depend on.

Even though our actions may change, we try to develop a certain amount of constancy in the mind. This is why we're practicing concentration, focusing on the breath, staying with the breath as it comes in, staying with the breath as it goes out, doing what we can to make it easy to stay with the breath. Part of that involves allowing the breath to be comfortable, and having the sense that the breath is not just air coming in and out of the lungs. We learn how to perceive the breath as the whole-body energy flow. How do the different parts of the body feel during the in-breath? Do you tend to tense up around your neck, or in your shoulders? Can you breathe-in in a way that you don't tense up? It's all connected — your posture, the way you breathe, the way the blood flows through the body. You can explore these issues as a way of making it easier to stay here.

Another way of making it easier to stay here is to have the right view about what you're doing. It may seem a little thing, just keeping the mind in one spot. You can think of all the other things you might be doing right now, all the other responsibilities you have, all the other problems you could solve. Those things can pull you away — because it's not just gross manifestations of greed, anger and delusion that pull us away. Your misinformed sense of responsibility can also pull you away: that sense of, "Well, I've really got to think about this. I've got to prepare for that. I've got all these other responsibilities out there in the world, things I've got to prevent, things I've got to encourage." But when you think in those ways, you're neglecting one of your major responsibilities, which is that if

you're going to do anything effective, anything skillful, the mind has to have a good solid basis inside.

It's like a post at the edge of the ocean. If your post is planted firmly down in the sand — or even better, if it's firmly planted down into the rock below the sand — then when the waves come in, the waves go out, the post doesn't go in, doesn't go out with them. You can use that post for lots of useful things. It can become a post on which you build a house. It can be a post to which you tie up your boat, so that the boat doesn't get washed out to sea. And the post itself doesn't get damaged much by the waves.

But if you take your post and lay it down at the edge of the ocean — thinking that by laying it down there you can prevent the waves from coming in much better than if it's standing in one spot — what happens of course is that the post gets washed in, washed out, and after a while, it gets smashed against a rock someplace. If anything is tied to the post, it'll get smashed, too. In other words, if you take on too many responsibilities out in the world but don't have a firm foundation for the mind, the mind ends up getting smashed to pieces. And it's of no use to anybody.

So while you're focused on one small point right here — just the breath, just the body — it may seem like you're neglecting your other responsibilities, but in actuality you're not. You're providing a solid foundation for the mind. A mind with a solid foundation is a lot more useful, both for you and for the people around you. Take this as your prime responsibility.

Because there's really only so much you can do for the world. You may think about other people you'd like to help, but there are areas of their minds, areas of their experience, where you can't reach, where you can't touch them at all. You see this very clearly when someone is sick and suffering in pain. You can't go in and help share out the pain. You may be able to give that person a medicine that helps relieve the pain somewhat. But sometimes there's so much pain that it goes beyond the reach of any morphine, any opium, any painkiller at all. That's where that person has to be responsible for him or herself. You see this in other people and it should remind you that you're going to have to face those same issues someday yourself. That's an area where each of us has to be responsible. If we can be responsible about how we handle our pain, we're much less burdensome to the people around us.

After all, it *is* our responsibility. We were the ones who chose to be born here. It was because of our desires and our cravings that we took birth as human

beings. When you're responsible for your birth, then you also have to be responsible for how you handle your aging, illness, and death. They all come as part of the same package. And the point from which you're going to learn how to handle these things is this point right here — as you're focused on the breath, focused in the present moment, learning how to let go of all your other wrong views, all your other distractions, all the other things you might cling to that are going to end up getting you smashed against the rocks.

So try to maintain this spot. Think of it as a post planted against the waves of the ocean. Even though the post gets knocked over, you realize you shouldn't let it stay knocked over. You know it's in a better position when it's standing up, planted down deep into the sand. Just knowing that much can help a lot. Otherwise, you feel you owe it to other people to let your post lie down in the waves, thinking that the post somehow will protect them from the force of the waves. But what happens is that sometimes the waves come behind the post and push up against other people, smashing *them* up against the rocks. So it's both for your own good and for the good of the people around you that you try to keep this post firmly planted right here. And try to keep your views right. There's a lot out there in the world that you cannot change. There's a lot you can't even know.

Kierkegaard once commented that we live life forward but we understand backwards. In other words, there are a lot of decisions we have to make right now, but we don't really know how they're going to turn out tomorrow or the next day, next month, next year. We can look back on decisions we made in the past and say, "Gee, I shouldn't have done that; I shouldn't have said this." And in some cases, we made the wrong decision fully knowing what we were doing. Those are the decisions that carry a lot of blame. But a lot of times, we made that wrong decision because we couldn't know. That kind of decision is something you can't blame anybody for. Nobody can blame you; you can't blame anybody else. So you have to leave that to being uncertain. It's part of the winds and the waves.

Like tonight's weather forecast: They say there may be a storm coming in. We don't know for sure. We do our best to prepare. If the storm doesn't come in, will we say, "Well, all that preparation was a waste of time, a waste of energy. We could've done other things." That's not the right attitude. You prepare as best you can. And as for the things you don't know, you just let them go. What you do know are certain basic principles. If you can develop more mindfulness, more alertness, more concentration, more discernment in the mind, you'll be better

prepared for handling things as they come up, even if you don't know ahead of time what they will be. If you've got these qualities developed in the mind, you'll be in a better position to handle anything, whatever comes your way.

The prime means for developing these qualities is by giving the mind one place to stay still, and then maintaining that stillness regardless of whatever else may come to knock it over. In some cases, that requires just being mindful and alert to what's happening. In other cases, it requires more discernment, catching the currents of the mind that would knock you over, learning how to resist the ones that say, "You really ought to think about this; you really ought to worry about that. You're sitting here with your eyes closed focusing on your breath, ignoring your responsibilities." You've got to learn how to be able to argue with those thoughts so that they don't overcome the mind.

So remember the post at the edge of the sea. If it's just lying down there on the sand, the waves will come up, and the post will get washed back and forth. If there are people standing on the beach, the post might hurt them. If there are rocks on the beach, the waves might wash the post up against the rocks and smash it. You don't want that. If your post is planted firmly there at the edge of the water, it's a lot more useful for yourself and for the people around you.

So have a sense of the value of staying firmly planted right here, focused right here, developing this stillness as a skill, getting the mind to be as constant as possible. We know that the constancy you create through concentration like this cannot be totally constant. After all, you're building your path here out of what are called aggregates. And as the Buddha said, all these aggregates are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. When we're resisting that to some extent, we know that we can't ultimately make our state of concentration permanent. But what we *are* doing is giving the mind the strength it needs to let go of things that cause harm, of things that cause suffering, because we're letting go from a position of strength. We don't let go out of weakness. If people let go out of weakness, there's bound to be an element of sour grapes, an element of dissatisfaction or resentment, which means that they don't really let go. They're hoping for some other time when they can latch on again.

But if you let go out of strength, you let go for sure. When you've let go of things outside your concentration, then you can turn and look at the concentration itself. You realize that your concentration and discernment have taken the mind this far, but they can take it no further. The only thing that's keeping you from going further is the fact that you're holding on. That's when

you let go out of genuine strength. When you let go in that way, you find that there's something deep down in the mind that's constant, totally free from stress, beyond even the issues of self and not self — something that can't be affected by the wind or waves at all.

The image in the texts is of a stone post sixteen spans tall, planted into the solid rock of a mountain. Eight spans are buried in the rock; eight spans are aboveground. No matter which direction the wind comes from, it can't make the post shake at all. But until you can get to that point, use your post at the edge of the ocean. It may get knocked over now and then, but you know well enough once it's knocked over how to plant it down in the sand again. Even just this much can help you through a lot. It can help eliminate a lot of suffering even before you come to the end of suffering. And that's quite an accomplishment right there.

The Buddha Didn't Play Gotcha

August 28, 2007

Sometimes when you hear the Buddha's teachings explained, it's almost as if he's playing gotcha. He talks about jhana — the ease, the rapture that can come from concentration — but then you're told that if you try to attain jhana, you're not going to get there. Or once you get there, you have to be very careful not to get attached to it. It's dangerous, so you shouldn't do it too much. Similarly with nibbana: We're told that nibbana's the highest ease, the highest happiness, and yet if you want it, you can't get it. It's like he's dangling these things in front of you and taunting you, saying you can't have them.

That's not the way he taught at all. The ease and pleasure that come from jhana, he said, are totally blameless. As he was struggling to find Awakening, he spent six years practicing different austerities and finally realized that austerities were a dead-end. So the question arose: Is there an alternative way? He thought of the time when he was a child sitting under a tree while his father was plowing, and his mind entered the first jhana. So he asked himself: "Why am I afraid of that pleasure? Why am I afraid of that rapture? Is there anything blameworthy about it? Anything harmful about it?" And the answer he came up with was No. After all, it's a pleasure that can arise simply by focusing your mind on the breath. You're not harming anyone at all. And in following this pleasure, you're not getting intoxicated with youth or health or life or the other things that intoxicate the mind. So it's a good pleasure to pursue.

In this way, jhana was the first factor of the path that the Buddha realized in his quest for Awakening. And as with all the other factors of the path, he said it's something to be developed. So when states of ease and pleasure arise in your meditation, try to develop them. Try to master them as a skill.

A similar principle applies to nibbana. The path to nibbana does include desire, even though nibbana itself is the ending of all desire. If you had to drop all desire in order to get on the path, nibbana itself would be the path to nibbana. That would put you in a double bind. But the path actually includes desire. On the one hand, there's right resolve. The resolve to overcome attachment to

sensuality, the resolve to be harmless, the resolve not to feel ill will: These are all types of desire. And even more explicitly, the factor of right effort starts out when you generate desire for doing away with unskillful qualities and making sure they don't arise again. You generate desire to give rise to skillful qualities and bring them to the culmination of their development. In other words, the desire here focuses primarily on the path. Nibbana itself is beyond skillful and unskillful, but the factors of the path, such as right mindfulness and right concentration, are skillful qualities you want to develop, to give rise to, and then bring to the culmination of their potential.

So the Buddha is a very straightforward teacher. He points out that there are good things in the path and it's okay to desire them, simply that your desire should be mature. Immature desire is the kind that wants to get the results without putting in the effort, or focuses so exclusively on the results that you neglect the effort. As the Buddha said, you focus on the causes, and when the causes are ripe, they yield the results. Through developing the path, you come to realize the cessation of suffering. So you focus on the path and the goal takes care of itself.

Sometimes you may hear that the path and the goal are one. And the one way in which that teaching makes sense is if you realize that in the doing of the path, the goal gets realized. In other words, you're not supposed to sit there just going through the motions of the path, passing the time saying, "When is the goal going to appear?" — i.e., doing the path but with one eye someplace else. You focus your attention totally on developing the path. And in developing the path, the realization of the end of suffering appears right there.

So focus on bringing the mind to stillness. If the mind hasn't yet come to stillness, ask yourself: What's getting in the way? Use your ingenuity. It's not just a matter of desire. You use desire, you use persistence, you use your intent, as you really focus on what you're doing. And you use your powers of analysis and ingenuity, figuring out what's going wrong, what's not working right here, what distractions are getting in the way. You bring all of these bases of success to bear on what you're doing. But they all start with desire.

There are lots of good reasons to want to bring the mind to concentration, not only for your own sake, but for the sake of other people as well. If your happiness is more inwardly based, you need less and less from the outside world. Now, as the Buddha said, in order to attain strong states of concentration, the body needs to be nourished. You need a certain level of comfort for the mind to

settle down. But it's not that much. The more reliable your concentration gets, the easier it is to make do with less and less outside. You're placing less of a burden on other people. You're competing with them less.

That means you can treat them more fairly. You can go into a situation and base your actions, your words, and your thoughts totally on goodwill and compassion — because you realize you don't need anything from those people. It's when you need something from others that your actions are tilted in terms of bias or prejudice: in terms of things you desire, things that irritate you, things you're deluded about, or things you fear. This is because your hopes for happiness are focused on something outside. But when your desire for happiness is focused inwardly, you place less of a burden on things outside. You need less from the outside world, which means your compassion for other people can be more clearheaded, balanced, and fair.

In this way, the pursuit of happiness through developing strong concentration for the pursuit of total freedom is not a selfish thing. As long as your concentration is imbued with the other factors of the path — right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness — it's perfectly safe. They sometimes talk about getting stuck on concentration or becoming a concentration junkie, but those are cases where the concentration lacks the other elements of the path. Your understanding of why there's suffering in the world is skewed, or your understanding of why you're suffering is skewed. You spend all your time just focusing on your breath and not wanting to do anything for anyone else anywhere, not wanting to be bothered by the world.

You have to realize that it's not the world that's bothering you; you're bothering the world with your demands. A weakness in your concentration and a weakness in your discernment make you think that way. If your concentration is really solid, you can stay in all kinds of difficult situations and maintain your balance. Or even if you get knocked off balance in the areas where you're still attached, you can get back into balance a lot more easily if you've got right view and the other elements of the path.

So the dangers of concentration come when it's pursued to the exclusion of the other factors of the path. But right concentration, being focused in this present moment with full body awareness, a sense of ease and rapture that then shades into equanimity: That's a valuable skill. There are greater dangers in the path, such as the danger of getting teachers who say, "Well, you can't gain

concentration or you shouldn't try." That's pretty dangerous. Or other teachers who tell you you've attained some level of Awakening when you haven't yet. Holding on to their estimation of things is extremely dangerous, because it makes you complacent. It really blocks the path.

But if you stay in right concentration imbued with right mindfulness and right view, it's *in* the concentration that you start seeing the stress of clinging to the aggregates. What the Buddha does, basically, is to teach you how to take these aggregates — which we normally cling to in an unskillful way — and learn how to cling to them in a more skillful way, pointing out that, Yes, it is possible to attain happiness here. As you get more and more sensitized to the grosser suffering outside, your hopes for happiness get more and more focused on the concentration. When they're totally focused here and have gotten good results, you can start taking the concentration apart, realizing that even this source of happiness is composed of aggregates. It still has a potential for being inconstant. Stressful. Not-self. That spurs you to look for something deeper. But it puts you in the position where you can see that "something deeper" more clearly as well.

In other words, your taste for happiness has grown more refined. Repeatedly, the Buddha talks about analyzing the concentration in and of itself, seeing what in the concentration is form, feeling, perception, thought fabrication, or consciousness. You realize that even when you let go of outside aggregates, or the grosser aggregates, there are still these subtler aggregates inside. It's right here that the work can be done.

So the Buddha's teachings are very straightforward. Here, he says, is a better, safer, more blameless form of happiness. Go for it. As you master it, you find there are even deeper levels of happiness, ultimately to a level that's totally unconditioned. But it's okay to desire these things. It's okay to make an effort in these directions. It's through the desire, through the effort, that you get there. So we learn how to take that desire and focus it in the right place — on the path, on the causes — and the results will come. That's about as straightforward as you can get.

Seeing with the Body

January 6, 2006

One of the Buddha's essential insights was that the suffering that really weighs down the mind is a suffering we create — and it's unnecessary. Even though we create it and we suffer from it, we cling to it. This has some unexpected implications. One is that for a lot of us, if we didn't suffer, we would be lost. Even the simple idea of not suffering would leave us hanging. This is because our strongest sense of who we are often comes from being treated unjustly. We define ourselves through the suffering that comes from being treated unjustly. If we were to deny ourselves that perverse pleasure, we'd feel lost. But when other people treat us unjustly, we start treating ourselves unjustly. When other people criticize us unfairly, we start criticizing ourselves unfairly. We suffer from all of this, but we would feel lost without the sense of self provided by that unfairness. The mind can be really perverse.

To work around this problem, the Buddha has us focus simply on the problem of suffering without asking who's causing this, or who you are, or what you have to do to your sense of self to make it better. He says, "Just look at the suffering in and of itself." That's important: the "in and of itself." That helps get you out of the entanglements that come from *your* clinging to *your* suffering. When you can look at these things as events simply on their own terms, simply as a pattern of cause and effect without asking how *you're* involved in it, when you can simply see the fact of suffering as it's being caused, then you see the connection to its cause. You realize that you don't have to engage in the cause. That helps loosen up your attachment to the suffering.

So it's important to understand this process: that you're clinging to, identifying with, the very things that cause you to suffer. Even though that's what defines you, it's simply a definition you've imposed on things. You don't really need it to function. You don't really have to worry about being annihilated if you stop the suffering.

For many people that's a scary idea, because the connection between their self and their suffering is so strong. This is why the Buddha focuses you back on

just the suffering in and of itself. Don't ask who's doing this. Don't ask how *you're* involved in it. Just ask, "What's happening here?" Look at things in and of themselves as events, as processes.

Start with the breath in and of itself. That's pretty neutral. And ask yourself, "What's going on in the process of breathing?" You breathe in until breathing in starts getting uncomfortable. Then you breathe out until breathing out starts getting uncomfortable. Then you start breathing back in again. You're bouncing back and forth between the discomfort of too much in and too much out. Yet you need to breathe. If you tried to stop breathing by holding your breath, that would be painful too. You've got to breathe, yet it's breathing between one extreme of breathing out too long, and the other extreme of breathing in too long. The breath is an impersonal process, something you can watch in and of itself, and it teaches you a lesson about suffering in and of itself.

Fortunately for us there are not too many elaborate theories about the deeper meaning of breath. Just the fact: The breath is now coming in; the breath is now going out. You can't watch your future breaths; you can't watch your past breaths. You've just got the present breath. And it's impersonal. You know that everybody has the same breathing. You simply ask the question of whether it feels good or not. That's all you've got to ask right now. As for other larger issues, you can put them aside. Get used to dealing just on this level, the immediate experience of the breath, in and of itself.

In doing that, you help to de-personalize the issue of suffering. From this point you can begin to spread your attention to other problems that need depersonalizing as well. But make sure you've got this foundation strong. Simply stay with the issue of how the breath is coming in, how the breath is going out. Are you enjoying it? Even though the breath moves between two different types of pain, if you adjust it properly you can make the experience of the breath in between, the *feel* of the breath in between, really gratifying — as it feels good coming in, coming in, down to the lungs, down to the abdomen. It can feel refreshing, gratifying. And just that fact of how it feels in the present moment, without your having to get involved in thoughts of identity, the narratives of your life, your worldviews: Get used to looking at things simply on this level, just the experience in and of itself.

This gives you a new foundation. You get in touch with the ability, in the midst of the potential for pain, to make the present moment pleasant. And it's not threatening. It's gratifying. You shift your center of gravity away from the

sense of self that needs to suffer in order to maintain its identity, to a different sense of self: one based on a sense of pleasure, combined with a greater sense of competence. You're developing a skill and you see the results immediately. This new center of gravity then acts as the fulcrum from which you can pry loose your other attachments, the old ways of identifying yourself.

They've done studies of people going through psychotherapy, trying to figure out which method — Jungian, Freudian, or whatever — works best. And they've discovered that the actual method doesn't make all that much difference. What *does* make a difference is the ability of the patient to get inside his or her body, to fully inhabit the body, and then from that standpoint to work through whatever issues there are in the mind. This is what you're doing as you work with the breath. You're getting into the body, getting more sensitive to the body, creating a new center of gravity for yourself, a new area of sensitivity.

A lot of the Buddhist texts, when they talk about the knowledge you gain from meditation, express it as a form of vision, something you see. You're working toward knowledge and vision, they say. The first experience of Awakening is the opening of the Dhamma Eye. Full Awakening comes with knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be. But there are also passages that describe this knowledge as something sensed not through the inner eye, but through the body. All the teachings about jhana are concerned with gaining a sense of ease and wellbeing from the breath and then allowing it to permeate the whole body. Some of the texts talk about "touching" the various formless dimensions that can be accessed through jhana, touching them with your body. One of the texts says that those who practice jhana touch the deathless with the body. And one of the verses in the Dhammapada says that you *see* the Dhamma with the body. The Sutta Nipata describes the Buddha as the All-around Eye: His whole body was an organ of vision, an organ of sight.

So one of the things we want to do as we practice is to get out of our heads — where we have all these notions about who we are and how we relate to other people, how we have to maintain our identity, which is centered on suffering, in the face of the onslaughts of the world outside — and learn how to fully inhabit the body. As we inhabit it, the body itself becomes an organ of vision, an organ of sight. You see things going on in the body you didn't see before. You re-sensitize the body. As a meditator you work from a new center of gravity so that when you start taking apart your habits of creating your sense of self — the habits that make you suffer but that you cling to so tightly — it's a lot less threatening. You

don't feel that you're going to be obliterated by the process. Taking apart these old habits becomes something you really like to do, because you're looking from another point of view. You're looking from the point of view of full-body awareness, full-body competence.

This is why it's so important to get in touch with the breath and to learn to breathe with the whole body: whole body breathing in, whole body breathing out. It develops a sensitivity and a foundation you need to do some really radical work on how the mind is causing itself to suffer, and how you can uproot all the ways that cause you to suffer. It's only from this different point of view that the work can actually be done.

Oneness

August 2, 2007

Once, when Ajaan Suwat was here, he asked me to give the Dhamma talk in Thai. I had been translating Ajaan Lee, so I used one of Ajaan Lee's images: comparing the practice to digging a well. Generosity was like a very shallow well, virtue a deeper well, whereas concentration was a well down to the water table. Afterwards he told me that the Dhamma talk had been too interesting. It was distracting people from their meditation.

So don't listen to me. Focus on your breath. The talk is here in the background to catch you if you wander away from the breath, like the catcher in the rye. I'm standing at the edge of a cliff in case those of you who are running around in the rye aren't really looking at what you're doing. If I see that you're heading to the edge of the cliff, I'm here to catch you, to make sure you don't fall away from your meditation object.

Or you can think of the talk as a fence. When you start leaving the meditation object, the first thing you'll run into is the fence formed by the sound of the talk. That's to remind you to go back. The word *desana*, the word we usually translate as "Dhamma talk," actually means pointing. And the talk is here to point you back to the breath, back to your present awareness, to make sure you don't go wandering off. Try to stay with the breath. Be one with your meditation.

There are two words with "one" in the Buddha's descriptions of jhana. One is *ekaggata*, as in *ekaggatarammana*, oneness of preoccupation, or singleness of preoccupation; and *ekaggatacitta*, singleness of mind. This kind of oneness applies to all levels of jhana. It means being focused on one thing, like the breath. You stay steadily focused on it, at the same time making it the one thing filling your range of awareness.

So you start out trying to do that. But in the beginning, there are two ones. There's the mind aware of the breath, evaluating the breath, commenting on the breath. That's one thing. And then there's the breath. One subject, one object, and you want to keep both of them "one" in their own ways. You want to make

sure that the one topic of your inner conversation is the breath. As for other things that have been going on in the course of the day, you don't talk about them. Don't go slipping off into the past, slipping off into the future, wondering about what you're going to do tomorrow, what you're going to do at the end of the meditation, or how much longer you have to meditate here. That's introducing other topics of conversation. And the mind never really settles down.

So just keep the topic of conversation on one thing, on the breath, and evaluate how it's going. What kind of breath would you like to breathe right now? You're perfectly free to choose. You may not be able to think about other things right now, but they're off the agenda. They don't really matter right now. When the breath is the one item on the agenda, you can give it your full attention and you're totally free to explore it. What kind of breathing would really feel good right now in your stomach? Let the body breathe that way. Focus on your stomach for a while and see what kind of breathing really feels good there. What kind of breathing feels good going down your backbone? What kind of breathing feels good in your legs? You may not yet be able to breathe with your legs, but there is a breath energy that can flow down through the legs. See what rhythm of breathing keeps that breath energy alive, awake.

Ajaan Lee talks about using your awareness of the breath to wake up the different properties of your body. This is what he means: having a sense that there's an energy flowing through your legs, flowing through your arms, all around your head, all the different parts of your body, out to the fingers and toes, like an electric current. There is even an energy, if you're really sensitive, that surrounds your body. Can you be sensitive to that? And what kind of breathing makes those different parts of the body feel good? Go through the body and tell yourself that you're breathing specifically for your stomach for a while, so what kind of breathing would feel good right there? If the stomach could speak, what kind of breath would it ask for? Then breathe specifically for the sake of your chest: What kind of breathing would feel good in your chest? And so on through the rest of the body: in the shoulder, in the back of your shoulders, between your shoulder blades, in the small of your back, in your hips, in your legs, in your toes, in your eyes. Then try to be aware of the breath in the whole body. This is how the breath, the object of your conversation, becomes one: It fills the range of your awareness. Think of the whole body breathing in, breathing out, and let the whole-body breath flow as comfortably as you can.

Then, after a while, when you've been evaluating the breath, and it really feels good as you're breathing in, breathing out, there comes a point where you don't have to evaluate it any more. As Ajaan Fuang once said, as you fill up the breath energy in the body it's like filling up water in a jar. There comes a point where the jar of water — here we're talking about those big jars that they used to line up along the sides of houses in Thailand to catch rainwater off the roof, enormous jars, sometimes bigger than a person: After a while the jar is so full of water that no matter how much more water you pour into it, it can't hold any more. The excess just flows out.

The same principle holds with the breath. You get to a point where the breath energy feels full throughout the body. The legs feel full, the arms feel full with a pleasant buzz of energy. They feel energized. Awake. And you don't need to do any more evaluation, for they're as full as they're going to get. You're now free to just dive into the breath.

This is where the other word for oneness in the descriptions of jhana, *ekodi-bhava*, comes into play. *Ekodi-bhava* means unification. It starts at the second jhana. The oneness of your awareness and the oneness of the breath become a single oneness, totally unified. You don't hold anything back. That sense of the observer, which is sometimes like an animal perched on your shoulders, looking through your eyes, looking at the breath in different parts of the body: You want to obliterate the sense that that observer is separate from the breath. So you breathe into the observer. Thinking of the breath energy in your eyes is especially helpful here, in creating a sense of being one. Many of our ideas of subject/object dichotomies come from our sense of sight — the object's out there, the eye is in here, and they don't touch. One good way of erasing that dichotomy is to focus on the breath-energy flow in your eyes. The breath is right there; the eyes are right there in the same place. There's no dividing line between them.

This helps to induce a sense that awareness is fully one with the breath; the breath is fully one with the awareness. Then you simply maintain that. Any thought that spills out from that, you don't want. Totally throw yourself into the breath. There's nothing else you have to do, nowhere else you have to go, nothing that has any need to pull you away.

Ajaan Lee makes the comment that this breath, if you're totally immersed in it, will take you through all the levels of jhana, up to the fourth. The difference is simply a matter of how steady you are in staying one with the breath, and of how still the breath grows in response. Ajaan Fuang noted that this sense of total

oneness or unification with the object can take you all the way up to the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. It's simply a matter of the perception you hold in mind. After the fourth jhana, you drop the perception of the form of the body — the still breath allows you to do this — and you can focus on the sense of space permeating the mist of sensations that remains. After that perception of space is unwavering, you turn to focus on what's aware of the space. That puts you into the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. To get beyond that, to the dimension of nothingness, you have to drop the oneness. But these tactics work only after this sense of total oneness is developed and strong.

It takes some energy to do this. You've got to throw all your energy into being one with the breath. But you find that by giving all your energy, you get a lot of energy back. That's when everything in the body is really awake. Your sense of awareness permeates every cell. The breath permeates every cell. It flows so well that the in-and-out breath can grow more and more still.

This is when your preoccupation with the object of your meditation really does become one, not simply in the sense that it's the one thing you're talking about to yourself. Actually, you're not talking about it much any more. You're just in with it. And it fills the whole range of your awareness.

When you do this, you find that any movement of mental chatter in the mind becomes very obvious. When you see it, just drop it, drop it, drop it. When a little stirring happens in your awareness, zap it before you even know what it's going to talk about. This is not the time for chatter. You've got something much better going on here. The mind is snug with the breath like a hand inside a glove, totally surrounded in the breath. The breath has you surrounded on all sides. You're not pulling back to watch it from outside. You're totally immersed in it. To use a phrase from the Pali, this is *kayagata-sati*. Your mindfulness is immersed in the body, your awareness is totally surrounded by the breath, totally surrounded by the body.

Once you can do this, just try to maintain it in a very balanced state. Part of the mind might object: "This is stupid. You're not thinking about anything." But that's precisely the point: You don't have to think about anything. The mind needs this opportunity to rest, to gain energy. Ajaan Lee compares this to putting a knife in a scabbard. You want to make sure that your knife is sharp when you need it, so you have to protect it. Put it in something that keeps it snug and protected on all sides. When you need it to cut something, you take the knife out of the scabbard. Because it's sharp, it can cut right through things. But in the

meantime, you've got to keep your mind well protected, well energized. This is when the mind enters into fixed penetration in a very strong and solid way. This is the heart of the path. The other factors will come out of this and surround this — or, as the Buddha says, support this. But this oneness of the mind with its object is the center from which everything else happens.

Ajaan Lee talks about this as the point where all four frames of reference — the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, the mind in and of itself, mental qualities in and of themselves — all become one. You could look at this sense of oneness as any one of the four. From one perspective it's body, from another it's feeling, or mind, or mental qualities. But they're all here in the same place. If you want to see the actual distinctions among them you have to bring them together first. If you draw lines around them before making them one, the lines tend to come more from your ignorance than from genuine knowledge. But if you make them one, then when they finally do separate out, it's not because you tried to pry them apart. Ajaan Lee's analogy is of heating a piece of rock containing different kinds of ore. You heat it to a certain temperature, and the silver melts out; at another temperature, the gold melts out; at another temperature, the tin — all of their own accord. In other words, you're not dividing things up in terms of your preconceived notions. Instead, you put the energy of this oneness into the breath, to make everything one. That's when things are allowed to separate in a natural way, in ways that you may not have expected.

But in the meantime, keep trying to make them one. Get really good at this. This is an essential skill in the meditation. As for the insight that will arise from this, you don't have to worry about it, at least not yet. Just make sure the foundation is solid.

Walking Meditation: Stillness in Motion

July 20, 2006

In Thailand, it's common that when an ajaan arrives at a monastery he's never been to before and wants to check out how serious the monks are about practicing, he looks at the walking meditation paths. If they're well swept and obviously well worn by walking, he takes it as a good sign. One of the reasons, of course, is that if you look at the place where someone sits you can't see how worn it is through the sitting, whereas walking wears a rut in the path. But the other reason is that walking meditation is an essential part of the practice that people tend to underestimate. By and large we emphasize the sitting and see the walking simply as an opportunity to get a change of pace from the sitting, to get up and stretch our legs a bit.

But that's not the only purpose for the walking. In the Canon, when the Buddha talks about the benefits of walking meditation, some of them are health benefits, but in terms of the mind, he says that the concentration developed while walking is not easily destroyed. This is an important point to ponder. When we sit quietly, we're trying to get the mind still, and we try to keep the body still as a way of helping the mind along. But you also want to be able to keep the mind still in the midst of movement, in the midst of activity. That's where walking meditation comes in.

When you get up from your sitting meditation to walk, try to maintain the same center you had while sitting. You might think of it as a bowl full of oil that you're carrying with you as you get up from the seat and walk over to the path and continue walking. You don't want to spill a drop. That requires a readjustment in where you keep your focus. Normally, when you open your eyes, the first tendency is for your awareness to go flowing out the eyes, out into the world of your visual sphere. You lose some of your sense of being inside the body.

So remind yourself not to lose that sense. Maintain it even as you open your eyes. You may find that this can knock you off balance the first time you try it, for it means finding a different kind of balance from what you're used to. But it's important that you develop this new sense of balance, this sense of being fully

inside your body, fully in the breath, even while walking, even while moving, even while negotiating with the surroundings in which you walk, because eventually you want to get to the point where you can maintain that same sense of center in the midst of all your activities — talking, working, eating, whatever — wherever you are. And this is a good first step in that direction. Walking meditation is a means of connecting your sitting meditation with mindfulness throughout daily life.

If, when you get on your walking path, you find that your center has slipped, immediately bring it back. Then walk to the end of the path at a normal pace — or slightly slower, if you find it helps your concentration — but don't walk at an abnormally slow pace or you won't get the practice you need in bringing centered mindfulness to your normal activities. Don't glance around at the trees or the other sights around you. Keep your eyes downcast, focused on the path several steps in front of you. You can hold your hands in front of the body or in back, the important point being that you don't swing your arms around. When you get to the end of the path, stop for a brief second to reestablish mindfulness in case it slipped away while you were walking, and then turn, stop for a second, and walk back in the other direction. Always try to turn in the same direction, either clockwise or counter-clockwise, to the right or to the left, so that you don't have to keep deciding which way you're going to turn at the end of the path.

Aside from that, try to maintain the same sense of center you had while sitting with your eyes closed. In other words, focus on the breath. Even though you're walking and looking ahead to make sure you don't trip over things, you want to maintain the sense of being centered in the breath as much as possible. Don't let the looking and the walking pull you away from your center. This requires practice, maintaining a center in the midst of movement.

This is important for two main reasons. One, as I said just now, is that it gets you used to maintaining your center in other activities as well, so that even when you're engaged in complex activities, even when you're thinking about things, you can still have a sense of inhabiting the body, being centered within the breath. You may have so many other things going on that you can't keep track of when the breath is coming in or going out, but you should be able to maintain a sensitivity to the energy tone in the body — where it's relaxed, where it's tight, what you can do to keep it relaxed and comfortable in all situations. You're inhabiting the body. You're not going off entirely into some other thought world. This keeps you grounded. It gives you a place to return to as soon as you've done

whatever work needs to be done in that thought world. Otherwise, you hop trains, from one train of thought to the next train of thought, like a hobo, and you end up in Lincoln, Nebraska. Whereas, if you're grounded here, as soon as the thought world has done its work, you're back here with the breath again. That way you can stay grounded in the midst of your different activities. You don't get lost in the course of the day.

The other reason why it's important to develop this ability to stay centered in the midst of activity, is that while you're doing walking meditation, you begin to observe how the mind slips out. It's often the case that you gain insight into the movements of the mind a lot more easily while you're walking than while you're sitting, because when you're sitting, everything is supposed to be totally still. You don't have to pay attention to anything else at all. You can clamp down on everything and get very, very centered, very, very still. But while you're walking, you still have to watch; you still have to move; there are decisions to be made even in the simple matter of walking. Where you're going to place your eyes, where you're going to step, noticing how close you are to the end of the path: simple things, but they're movements of the mind. And when the mind moves that way, it's easy for other intentions to sneak into the movement to divert it to their own ends. If you're not careful, they'll pull you away. But if you get used to looking for them, you gain a sense of how the mind tends to flow out.

Luang Pu Dune talks about this in his short definitions of the four noble truths. The mind that goes flowing out, he says is a cause of stress. It's good to be able to catch that flowing out in action, to see the current, to see how and why it moves, and to get practice in not flowing along with it. Ajaan Lee also talks about this in his discussion of mind as a frame of reference. You start, he says, with a sense of awareness that's still and bright. Then a current flows out from that awareness and goes to sense objects. Sometimes it's looking for something to get angry about, sometimes for something to get greedy about. The reason we don't notice what's happening is that we tend to go with the flow. But if you put yourself in the same position as when you're doing walking meditation — that you're going to stay still even though other things have to move — you can develop the skill needed to stay still while the current of the mind is flowing out, and you don't go with it. You watch it go for a little ways, and because you're not inhabiting it, it just falls short of its mark and dies.

So you get to see the mind in action and yet not get carried away by the action. This way it's a lot easier not to go along with everything that comes

flowing through the mind. You get a stronger sense of the observer that can watch the movements of the mind as events, not as worlds to inhabit. If you got into those worlds, they'd turn into all kinds of stories and take you to a dark place on the outskirts of Bangkok, shoot you, and dump you out of the car. But when you see them simply as events, you don't get involved unless you see clearly that they really are useful. This puts you in a much better position not to get carried away by things.

The same ability to watch movement but not move along with it, helps you analyze your own concentration. The Canon talks about developing an ability to step back a bit from your concentration after you've mastered it. In the first stages of concentration practice, the Buddha recommends learning how to indulge in the concentration, enjoy it, immerse yourself in it, really get absorbed. In other words, you fully plant your mind in the object and become one with it. While you're doing that, you can't think analytically about what you're doing at all. You're totally focused on the one object, the one perception. You may adjust it a little here, a little there, but when you've done enough adjusting, you allow yourself to get immersed in it. While you're in that state, you can't do much analyzing of any sort. But then the Buddha talks about stepping back a bit. The image he gives is of a person sitting, looking at someone who's lying down, or of a person standing, looking at someone who's sitting. You're above the other person a bit, and you can observe what the other person looks like, what he or she is doing.

In the same way, you can learn how to observe the mind while it's still. You aren't so totally implanted in the object, but at the same time you don't totally leave concentration. The reason you can do this is because you've developed the skill through walking meditation for the observer to be still even though there's a little bit of movement in the mind. This way you can observe your state of concentration.

The Buddha recommends lots of ways you can observe it. Look for whatever you can recognize as form, feeling, perception, thought construct, or consciousness within the concentration, and then contemplate its behavior. One simple way is contemplating the activity of perception. To what extent does the perception you're using as a marker for your concentration create stress or disturbance for the mind? Learn to observe that perception, the label you place on things, as an act of the mind. There's an element of intention behind it. Or, many times, there's a whole frame of reference for that particular perception, a

whole world of background. But if you can see the perception as an activity with a beginning, a middle, and an end, you see that the perception is one thing, the actual object of the perception is something else.

One of the classic analogies the Buddha gives is of a mirage. You see a tree in the mirage, even though the actual tree is much farther away than the image of the tree in the mirage. The tree in the mirage is one thing; the actual tree is something else. They're connected but separate. When you can see the distinction between the perception and the actual object, you can start seeing the perception in motion and see what kind of effect it has as part of a causal chain. That way, you can see which kinds of perceptions are helpful, which ones are not.

Ajaan Lee points this out in his breath meditation instructions. The way you perceive the breath in the first jhana is going to be different from the way you perceive it in the second, the third, or the fourth. In the fourth jhana, you perceive the breath as a still energy field. What you've done is to tune in to a still energy field that's already there in the body. The way you can tune in is through this perception. What do you have in your current range of awareness that's breath energy but still? If you can't focus on that just yet, focus on the perception of breathing in, breathing out, trying to get the right length of breath, the right quality of breath. That will help you to get centered and to settle down. But there will come a point where the understanding of the breath that got you into concentration gets in the way of your moving to more subtle levels of concentration. So you need alternative ways of perceiving breath in the body.

Instead of focusing on the in-and-out breath, try focusing on the subtle breath energies that flow through the blood vessels, flow through the nerves. They're a very subtle form of the in-and-out breath. Then there's a more subtle energy that goes very fast. As soon as you start thinking of breathing in, it's already gone around the body, throughout the body, from head to toe. And then there's another level of energy, the still breath, something that's always there, regardless of whether there's an in-breath or an out-breath. Ajaan Lee mentions one of the energy centers where you can access this — where the diaphragm connects to the rib cage right under your lungs — but there are other spots where you can first access it as well. The in-breath and out-breath can impinge on this still energy, can squeeze it, but if you decide not to let the in-and-out breathing interfere with that sense of still energy, you can then let that sense of stillness suffuse the whole body. You move to a deeper level of concentration, where everything feels wide open, still, and free.

You've done this by focusing on your perceptions as events, testing their results, and then changing them to give better results. As you grow more proficient at this, you can start observing the entire process, to see how perceptions shape your experience as a whole. That's one way of developing a sense of disenchantment and disengagement, seeing how what you thought were the raw data of experience are already shaped by perception. This is one way to develop insight in the course of practicing concentration.

This all depends on that ability to observe the mind in action and yet not get caught up in the action. And this is why walking meditation is so important, because it helps give you practice in perfecting that ability.

So don't think of the walking simply as something you do when you get too tired to sit, or as something where you simply go through the motions until you're ready to sit again. It's not a meditation break; it's an essential part of the meditation. It develops an added skill, the skill to be centered in the body not only while the body is still, but also while the body is moving. Walking meditation teaches you to be still in the midst of movement, to get a stronger sense of the mind as the observer that doesn't move along with the things it observes.

Remember that chant about respect for concentration. It doesn't apply only to sitting concentration. It also applies to walking meditation as an essential skill in your concentration practice. To develop respect for these things, as the Buddha said, puts you in the presence of nibbana.

The Skill of Restraint

December 20, 2007

People often ask how to bring the practice into daily life. The answer is relatively simple. It's one many people don't like to hear, but it is simple: restraint. There are basically two kinds of restraint. There's restraint in what you do, and restraint in how you look and listen and smell and taste and feel and think about things — in other words, restraint in what goes out, and restraint in what comes in. And both kinds of restraint require a good amount of skill.

Take restraint of the senses: There's a skill to looking, a skill to listening. You want to look at things in such a way that you're not exciting greed, anger, or delusion. You want to listen to things in such a way that you don't excite greed, anger, or delusion. And so on down through the senses. This is a skill. You want to be able to do it in such a way that you don't starve yourself of pleasures to the point where you break down and suddenly find yourself in front of an open refrigerator, scarfing down a gallon of ice cream. You need to know how to keep the mind well fed even as you're starving your defilements. In mastering this skill, it helps to have concentration as a foundation. The texts often give restraint of the senses as a prerequisite for concentration, but as is so often the case in the Buddha's teachings, the two qualities actually help each other along.

Try to notice when you look at something: Does your attention go flowing out? Do you lose your sense of the body? If you do, it's a sign that your looking isn't all that skillful. You want to be able to stay in the body as you look, as you listen, to maintain your sense of the breath energy throughout the body. If you can't, that's a sign either that you're looking for the purpose of forgetting the body — in other words, you're looking for the purpose of greed, anger, or delusion — or you're simply careless, and the sight, the sound, the smell, or the taste, whatever, happened to catch you off guard.

That's how most people look and listen and smell and taste and feel and think about things. They forget their inner center and suddenly find themselves centered outside, trying to get some pleasure from grabbing onto a sight or a sound and then elaborating on it — either to make it more attractive or to make

it seem more meaningful than it actually is. If the mind is in a mood for a little bit of anger, you focus on the things that would provoke the anger and then you can elaborate on it, proliferate as much as you like.

Those are where our skills tend to be. We're great at proliferating. But if you think of input at the senses as a kind of food for the mind — which is how the Buddha sees it — you have to ask yourself: Are you preparing good food for the mind or junk food? Or poisonous food? That's the kind of cooking we're used to. We think we're cooking up great meals, but they can make us sick. So you've got to learn a new way to cook for the mind.

The Buddha counts sensory input among the four foods for consciousness. It actually includes three of the four: contact at the senses; intentions at the senses — why you're looking at these things, listening to these things to begin with; and then consciousness of the act of sensing. These three aspects of sensory input are what the mind is feeding on all the time.

The basic skill in learning new ways to cook this food is to focus on the breath and get the mind centered inside. You're actually changing the level of the mind when it's inside the body in this way. Instead of being on the sensual level, it's suddenly on the level of form, which is a higher level than the level of sensual desire. Even though there may be the desire to stay here at the level of form, it's a skillful desire because it raises the level of the mind. You're not so dependent on things outside for your happiness, so you're in a position where you can look at sensual pleasures from above.

At the same time, you're learning how to make the most of what you've already got. As Ajaan Lee says, it's like learning how to grow food on your own property rather than invading the property of others to plant crops on their land. Learn how to develop a sense of ease, a sense of fullness and refreshment right here in the body. Make that your food. Try to preserve and protect that level of the mind. That's the skill in how you look at things and listen to things: maintaining this sense of the center in the body, a sense of ease, refreshment, and fullness no matter what happens outside. That puts the mind on a higher plane — and in a much better position.

When you handle restraint of the senses in this way, you're not depriving the mind. You're simply learning how to give the mind better food, to nourish it in a healthier way, a way that's totally blameless. Sometimes you hear people talking about the dangers of getting attached to jhana, as if it were a huge monster waiting to ambush you on the side of the path. But the dangers of jhana are

relatively minor. The dangers of being stuck on the sensual level, though, are huge. When your happiness is dependent on sensory pleasures being a certain way, it can lead to all sorts of unskillful behavior as you try to keep on feeding the mind the kind of sights, sounds, etc., it likes. This is why we see so much killing and stealing, illicit sex, lying, getting drunk around us in the world. All the precepts get broken because of people's attachment to the pleasures of the senses. You don't see anybody killing or stealing because of their attachment to jhana.

So even though this is an attachment, it's a better one. And when your happiness is not dependent on things outside being a certain way, people outside have less power over you. We see this so much these days. All they have to do is wave the red flag: "There's danger out there; there are terrorists out there; they can harm us. We've got to do all kinds of evil things to stop them." That's what they tell us. If the mind's only nourishment is things outside, you're going to be swayed by those arguments. But when you can step back, and say, "No, I've got a source of pleasure, a source of happiness inside, that people outside can't touch," then you're much less likely to be led astray.

In this way, your ability to find nourishment inside is protection for the mind. The pleasures of the world outside hold a lot less poison because you're not trying to feed on them anymore. They're still there, but you can learn how to handle them more skillfully, use them more skillfully, as you try to make the mind even stronger.

For instance, there will be times in your meditation when things aren't going as well as you'd like. In cases like that, it can be helpful to go outside and look at the beauty of nature around you — the clouds, the sunset, the moon and the stars at night — to help clear and refresh your mind. There are passages in the Canon where MahaKassapa, who was one of the strictest and sternest of the Buddha's disciples, talks about the beauty of nature. The constant refrain in his verses is of how the hills, the mountains bathed in rain, and the jungle refresh him. Some of the first wilderness poetry in the world is in the Pali Canon — an appreciation of the beauties of not just nature but of *wild* nature. That sort of appreciation is part of the skill in learning how to gladden the mind.

What this comes down to is that, as the Buddha said, even something as simple as looking or listening can be developed as a skill. You look and listen while at the same time trying to maintain your sense of being centered inside. This is one of the best measurements for how much greed, anger, or delusion is

lurking in the mind and pushing it around. If you catch the mind flowing out to a particular object, there you are: You've found a defilement.

Many of us in the West don't like the word "defilement." We deny that there's anything defiled in our minds and yet, when the mind is clouded by desire, narrowed by desire, that's precisely what the Buddha means. Your sense of inner awareness gets obscured and narrowed as your attention goes flowing out. According to Ajaan Lee, the tendency to flow out to things is the meaning of *asava*: effluent or fermentation. That kind of looking and listening — the kind where your mind flows out to the object — is unskillful looking, unskillful listening. If you're skillful, you can stay inside while you see and hear. When you catch the mind in the course of flowing out, you've learned an important lesson: that there's still greed, anger, and delusion in the mind. If you want to look for it, here it is. Only when you see it can you actually do something about it. You begin to sense the danger of falling for those currents. You develop the motivation to *want* to do something about it, so that you don't have to get pushed around like this any more. You find ways of stopping the flow at its source.

This is where you find that being inside the form of the body really is a higher level of food for the mind, a higher level of happiness, a better place to be. You want to do everything you can to stay here, regardless of what happens outside. When a wildfire swoops down the mountainside at you, you want to stay right where you are. You may want to move the body, of course, but you want your center to stay right here inside the body. When disappointments come in life, you still want to stay here and not let the disappointments from outside make inroads into the mind. When a cold wave comes, a heat wave comes, you want to be able to find your refreshment, your sense of wellbeing, here in the body.

This is why restraint of the senses is not deprivation. It's actually a way of feeding the mind better food, giving it a higher level of pleasure. But you can't have everything. If you go for the more dangerous food, you miss out on the better food. You've got to make the choice: health food or junk food. In that sense, restraint is a form a deprivation. But it's actually a trade. You're getting something better in return.

As you go through the day, keep asking yourself that question: "What am I feeding on right now? And what is it saying about the mind? What am I learning about the mind by watching the way I feed?" In this way, the simple act of

looking or listening is part of the practice. If you do it skillfully, it's nourishment for the practice. It keeps it going.

The path doesn't provide refreshment for the mind only while you sit here with your eyes closed, or while you're doing walking meditation. When you know how to exercise restraint, you can gain refreshment throughout the day. There's a continuity in the practice. When you sit down and close your eyes, you're right here. You don't have to spend the whole hour pulling the mind in like a cat on a leash, because it's already here. You've already been developing the wisdom and discernment that protect the mind, keeping it here. You don't have to cook them up fresh every time you sit down and meditate.

So think of everything you do throughout the day as a skill, including the way you exercise restraint. Sometimes that means not looking at or listening to the things you don't know how to deal with yet — like a beginning boxer who knows enough not to take on a world champion. But you won't have to go through life with blinders on all the time. You can teach yourself how to look at things that used to set off your anger or set off your lust, but you do it in a new way, a way in which they *don't* set you off. If there's something you feel greed for, look at the unattractive side of getting: what would be involved in trying to gain that thing and keep it. If there's lust, think of the unattractive side of the human body: your own and that of everyone around you. As Ajaan Lee would say, look at things with both eyes, not just one.

And furthermore, stay centered right here while you're doing your looking so that you can check and see if, as you're looking and listening, you're really staying separate from the defilement. Or are you sneaking it in, are you flowing along with it? This is why restraint is a good check on the mind, in two senses of the word *check*: Not only to stop it, but also to keep tabs on what's actually going on. If the defilements seem really quiet while you sit in meditation, well, here's your chance to test them. Do they flow out during the rest of the day?

Restraint is what provides continuity to the practice. If you do it skillfully, your looking and listening all become part of the practice. They can keep you on the path all day long.

Guardian Meditations

June 8, 2007

If you've ever opened a book to look at dependent co-arising, your first impulse was probably to close the book because the topic is so complex. But actually there are some good basic lessons you can learn, even from your first impressions. The primary factor is ignorance. That's what starts suffering in motion. When you replace the ignorance with knowledge, that cuts the chain of causes and conditions leading to suffering.

So it's good to know precisely what kind of knowledge is called for here: knowledge of the four noble truths. This is why right view is always given as the first factor in the noble eightfold path. It starts with conviction in your actions: that your actions are real, that they really do have results, and that the quality of the results is determined by the quality of the mental state engendering the action. It's within this context that the four noble truths make sense. After all, suffering is a result of a particular mental action, or a series of mental actions — craving and ignorance being primary. If mental actions didn't have an impact on your life, the four noble truths would be meaningless.

This, of course, directs us to where we have to practice: We've got to train the mind. Notice that each of the four noble truths entails a particular duty, each of which is a skill to be mastered. You're trying to comprehend suffering so that you can let go of its cause. You develop the path so that you can realize the end of suffering. Those are the duties you have to master as skills. This is why in the Buddha's teaching there's no big controversy over sudden versus gradual Awakening. The kind of knowledge we're developing here, like any skill, is incremental. The more you work on it, the more sensitive you get. Ultimately you reach a point where you really understand.

The image in the texts is of the continental shelf off of India. It's a gradual slope and then there's a sudden drop-off. It's not all or nothing. The build-up is important, because the build-up is what makes you more sensitive. Only when you're really sensitive can you have those "Aha" moments that really go deep into the mind, open things up, change your perspective on everything. This is why the

eightfold path is not only composed of right view, but also other factors that help to increase your ability to know, to learn, to be aware of the mind, and to help you let go of the factors that obscure the mind. That's why one of the Buddha's terms for the path is "developing and letting go." You're developing clarity of mind; you're letting go of the things that obscure and defile the mind. So that's the big, important factor in the chain of causes and conditions: whether you're operating out of the right view of the four noble truths, or the wrong view of ignorance.

The other point that will immediately strike you if you look at dependent co-arising is how many of the factors come prior to sensory contact. Things don't just begin with sensory contact. You bring a whole load of preconditions to any experience, and working on those preconditions is what's going to make all the difference. For instance, building right off of ignorance there are what they call fabrications. The way you breathe, if it's done in ignorance, can contribute to suffering. That's physical fabrication. Verbal fabrication consists of the way you direct your thoughts to things and then comment on them. If this is done in ignorance, it's going to lead to suffering. Mental fabrication consists of perceptions and feelings: If you fabricate these things out of ignorance, they're going to lead to suffering as well.

This is why a large part of the practice is focused on the issue of perception: the way you label things, how they fit into the larger picture of your thoughts. And this is why the Buddha didn't just sit people down, and say, "Okay, just be in the present moment and don't think about anything else." He would often start his instructions by leading up to an understanding of *why* we're in the present moment, exactly what we're trying to look for in the present moment, what we're going to do about it when we see it.

This is why there are so many analogies and images in the Canon. They give you a framework for understanding what you're doing. And again, many of the images and analogies have to do with skills: Being a skillful meditator is like being a skillful cook, carpenter, or archer. There's a skillful way to perceive; there's even a skillful way to feel. Feeling comes not only from raw data, streaming in from the outside, but also from an element of fabrication and mental impulse. A physical impulse comes up your nerves, and your mind processes it before you're really conscious of it. What we're trying to do as we meditate is to learn how to bring some of these unconscious processes into the light of day. And

a central element in these processes is the way you perceive things. You can consciously train yourself to perceive things in more useful, more skillful ways.

There's a series of meditations called guardian meditations, which are very helpful in using skillful perceptions to get the mind in the right mood, in the right attitude, with the right understanding, as you come into the present moment. You'll often find, as you're sitting here meditating on the breath, that the problem is not with the breath. It's with the mental baggage you're carrying with you. So you want to open up the bags and throw out all the unnecessary weight. There's an image they have in Thailand of the old woman who carries around a huge bundle of straw on her back. She's always bent over because she's carrying so much straw. People ask her why she doesn't put it down, and she says, "Well, someday this straw's going to come in handy, so I'm carrying it for the day I'll need it." So she carries it wherever she goes. Of course there are many other things she could be carrying, but she can't because the straw is such a huge bundle, and of course it's pretty useless.

So you want to look into your baggage to see how much straw you're carrying around, so that you can lighten your load. Then you can replace it with better things, things that really will be useful. And the guardian meditations are a good way of sorting things out in your baggage.

The first guardian meditation is recollection of the Buddha, keeping in mind his Awakening, reflecting on it as a central event in the history of the world. The fact of his Awakening shows that through human effort true happiness can be found. It's an important point to keep in mind because so much of our modern culture tries to say, "Hey. You can't have an ultimate and deathless happiness, but you can have the happiness that comes from our eggbeater with an MP3 player built right into the handle," or whatever. In other words, they keep you focused on what you can get out of buying their stuff, which is all pretty miserable. How many articles in *The Onion* are based on this: "Woman discovers that buying that new mop did not deliver the fulfillment that she hoped it would bring to her life." In other words, our culture keeps us aiming pretty low: "Go for the quick fix. Go for something that doesn't require any effort or skill on your part, just money." They dress it up, make it sound like you'll be really happy if you buy their stuff.

So it's important to keep in mind that there was someone in the past who found true happiness and it was through his own efforts. And, as he said, it wasn't because he was a special god or anything. It was simply through developing qualities of mind that we can all develop — man, woman, child, lay

or ordained: ardency, resolution, heedfulness. We all have these qualities to some extent. It's simply a matter of developing them. The same with virtue, concentration, discernment: These are things we all have to some extent. It's simply a matter of learning how to make them all-around.

So when you're tempted to go for the quick but short happiness, remind yourself, "The Buddha says that true happiness is possible, and that it can be gained through human effort." Do you want to live your life without exploring that possibility? Or do you just want to write it off?

In this way, keeping the Buddha's Awakening in mind is an important perception, an important perspective, to bring to all of your experiences. And there are many other things that you can gain by thinking about the Buddha's life: the sort of person he was, his last message to be heedful. He was the sort of person who had already found true happiness. He didn't need to gain anything from anyone else, but he went out and he taught for 45 years, walking around Northern India. Wherever there was someone who was ready to be taught, ready to benefit from his teachings, he would walk there. That's the kind of person who taught this Dhamma. Not someone who was running a retreat center and needed to bring in cash, and who was willing to say anything to attract clientele, but someone acting totally out of pure motives, pure compassion. So that's the kind of practice we're practicing as we follow his path. And it's ennobling for us to practice in that lineage.

So these are good perceptions to hold in mind. Especially when you're getting discouraged or tempted to give up on the practice, or if you think, "Well, maybe I'm not up to this": Remember that the essential qualities for Awakening are qualities that everybody can develop. But we have to develop them ourselves. We can't depend on anyone outside to come and do it for us. That's the other part of the message of the Buddha's life, the part that keeps you on your toes.

The second guardian meditation is goodwill. You want to bring an attitude of goodwill to everybody around you. When the Buddha talked about goodwill in the *brahma-viharas*, it wasn't ordinary, everyday goodwill. It was goodwill all around, without limit. That's not easy. It doesn't come naturally to us. We tend to have goodwill for certain people, and not so much for other people. As a result, our actions very easily turn unskillful. It's very easy to do harm to the people we don't care about or who aren't on our list of people who deserve to be happy. And it's also easy to drop people from the list when the mood strikes us, to treat even the people we love in unskillful ways.

So to protect yourself from that kind of unskillful action, you've got to learn how to make your goodwill all-around, 24/7. That doesn't mean creating a cloud machine that sends out billowing clouds in all directions to hide your lack of goodwill. When you start spreading thoughts of goodwill, first you spread it to people who are easy — the people you already love and like — and then to people who are harder. Even though you don't like them, you can ask yourself: "Why would I not want this person to be happy?" After all, when people aren't happy, they can do cruel and miserable things. The world would be a better place if everyone could find true happiness inside, regardless of whether you like them or not, or whether they've been good or not, or whether they're on your list of the "deserving." And besides, who made you the National Bureau of Standards? Why should your likes and dislikes rule the world? In this way, goodwill meditation is meant to be a challenge for you to really think through why you'd want to limit your goodwill, and to remind yourself of why it's good to have goodwill for everyone. You can't act on harmful intentions if your goodwill is all around. This is why it's called a guardian meditation.

The third guardian meditation is of the foulness of the body. A lot of people don't like this one. If we took a poll of meditators here in the West, we'd probably find this at the bottom of the list of popular meditation topics, yet it's very useful. Some people say, "Hey, I've already got a negative body image. Why do you want me to make it even more negative?" Well, there's healthy negative body image, as well as an unhealthy one. Unhealthy is when you see that your body is ugly, but other people have beautiful bodies. Healthy is when you see that we all have the same garbage inside ourselves: Nobody's liver would win the Miss Universe contest. This contemplation is helpful because it's a guardian. It protects you from inappropriate lust. There are so many people out there you could feel lust for, but if you acted on it you'd create a lot of trouble. Even if you're not practicing celibacy, you need a way to guard yourself against that kind of vagrant lust. So the next time you see an attractive person, instead of weaving all sorts of narratives from the ideas and associations you've developed around beauty, it's good to teach yourself other narratives, other associations. Right under the skin, what have you got? You've got all these blood vessels and nerves and *uck!* And as you go deeper, it's gets more *uck!* And what do you gain out of lusting for that? Why would you want it?

This sort of contemplation really goes against the grain, which is one of the reasons why it's useful to reflect on over and over and over again. Ajaan Maha

Boowa keeps making the point: Don't count the number of times you've reflected on the foulness of the body. Just keep doing it until it's done its job. After all, our lust after the human body is what led us to be born. This is what keeps us wanting to come back, and it makes us do really stupid things. So this contemplation is a useful tool to have in your arsenal. It's a useful new set of perceptions to develop. Our perceptions of beauty are dangerous, so it's good to learn how to see that beautiful bodies are not really beautiful. All you have to do is look inside a little bit and you see all kinds of stuff that can kill the lust if you really allow yourself to look at the body as a whole, and not just at the few parts you tend to focus on as being attractive.

The fourth guardian meditation is recollection of death. For most people this is pretty disturbing and depressing, but it's meant to be used in a way that's inspiring, that helps us to follow the path beyond death to the deathless. Remind yourself that we've got this practice that allows us to prepare for death and transcend it. Have you fully developed it? Are you really prepared? And the answer is almost always No. Okay, then, you've got work to do.

This is a good antidote for laziness. There's a great sutta where the Buddha talks about eight reasons for laziness and eight reasons for being diligent, and for both lists the external conditions are the same. You can be lazy because you're feeling sick; you can be lazy because you are about to go on a trip; you can be lazy because you've just gotten back from a trip; you can be lazy because you just recovered from an illness; you can be lazy because you haven't eaten enough; you can be lazy because you've eaten too much. But you can also use those circumstances to remind yourself: "I don't have much time." When you just recover from an illness, instead of saying, "I'm still weak, I'm not quite well yet, let me rest," you remind yourself: "I could get sick again. I could have a relapse, but at least now I've some strength, let me give this strength to the practice." If you haven't eaten enough, remind yourself, "The body is light; I'm not spending all that time and energy digesting my food, so I've got more energy now for the practice." You've got the right conditions for sitting very quietly, very still.

So your attitude is what's going to make the difference between whether the circumstances you've got right now are reasons for laziness or reasons for diligence. When you remind yourself that you don't know how much time you've got, it should stir you to action — so that when the time comes, when you really do have to go, you're ready, prepared. You've got the concentration, you've got

the power of discernment, you've got the strength of mind to deal with whatever comes your way.

If you sit around saying, "Please may I not die, please may I not die," someday you'll still have to die no matter how much you plead. A wiser attitude would be: "Please may I be ready when the time comes. May I have the strength to deal with any difficulty that might come my way." Then you realize that this is something you have in your power: to work on those strengths. After all, we've got the example of how the Buddha died. This is why these two recollections — recollection of the Buddha and recollection of death — go well together. The Buddha shows you how you can prepare. You look at the way he died: one last trip through all the jhanas. He died with no suffering at all and gained total release. It's possible for a human being to do this. If you think that comparing yourself to the Buddha is too much of a stretch, think about the members of the Sangha. You can read the verses of the elder monks and the elder nuns. Some of them were pretty miserable, total losers in meditation at first, and yet they were able to pull themselves together. They could do it; you can do it.

So these four contemplations are guardian meditations to bring wisdom into your perception of things, the labels and ideas you bring to your experience. The more you develop them, then the better the set of associations, the better the set of narratives you bring to, say, just the fact you're breathing, or the fact you're seeing, hearing, tasting, or touching things in the present moment. In other words, what you bring into the present moment is going to make all the difference.

This is why we train the mind. This is why we practice — so that when the time comes to perform, you can perform well, in a way that doesn't lead to suffering. You bring knowledge into the equation so that no matter which factor of dependent co-arising you're looking at — whether it's feelings, contact, craving, clinging, or whatever — you can untangle the conditions for suffering and replace them with conditions that lead to the end of suffering.

So learn how to develop these topics along with the breath. They help put the whole practice into the right narrative, into the right perspective, and they protect you so that you aren't constantly causing suffering for yourself and the people around you. That's the best protection there is.

Cleanliness is Next to Mindfulness

February 10, 2006

There's a famous poem in Thailand about the amorous adventures of two men trying to outdo each other in terms of the number of women they can sleep with. It's pretty light entertainment, but one of its most interesting passages is when one of the men is entering the apartments of a woman he's enamored with. He opens the door and there's a folding screen painted with a story. At that point the poem drops the story of the man and the woman, and goes into the story on the screen, describing not only the events depicted on the screen but also *how* they're depicted. It turns out the woman herself had painted the screen. So as the man goes from panel to panel, he not only learns the story but also gets a very good sense of what kind of person she is by the way she handled the scenes, how she painted the characters. So even though you haven't met her yet in the poem, by the time you finish the story in the screen you know her through her handiwork.

This is a principle you find throughout Thai culture. Back in the old days, people would learn about each other by the way they did things, by the things they made. If you were a young man and wanted to appeal to a young woman, you'd carve a pole for her to carry over her shoulder when carrying gifts to the monastery. And she'd get a very good sense of what kind of person you were both by the fact that you made a pole for that purpose, and by your handiwork in the way you carved it. Most of us nowadays would be hopeless in a situation like that. We're not used to making things.

This is one of our problems as meditators. We don't have many physical skills; we haven't learned the mental qualities that go with developing a physical skill. So we've got to go back and learn them from scratch. This is why the training is not just a matter of sitting and walking; it's a whole lifetime. All the things you do throughout the day are opportunities to develop mindfulness, alertness, learning how to be meticulous in what you do. There's the saying, "How you do anything is how you do everything." It may not be absolutely true, but it's close.

Ajaan Lee devotes almost a whole Dhamma talk to the topic of cleanliness. The title of the talk is “Reflection on Virtue,” or “Recollection of Virtue,” but a good two-thirds of the talk is about being clean. That’s an important part of virtue. In other words, while you’re living here, don’t think that the day-to-day facts of eating or having a place to sleep are minor matters to hurry through so you can get to the real business of meditating. If you’re sloppy with things outside, you’re going to be sloppy with your meditation. It’s a basic principle. You want to learn how to be meticulous, clean, neat, alert in all the things you do. In that way, the activities become not a chore to be disposed of as quickly as possible, or something just getting in the way of your meditation. They become part of the meditation. After all the word for meditation is *bhavana*: It means “to develop.” You’re developing qualities of mind. And the mind that cleans your room is the same mind that tries to clean itself out. If it’s sloppy in cleaning the room, it’s going to be sloppy in cleaning itself out. So you’ve got to take these things seriously.

I remember Ajaan Fuang telling me about his time with Ajaan Mun, how Ajaan Mun was extremely meticulous, very clean about everything. Even living out in the forest in the dry season when there was a lot of dust, his hut and everything around it was very neat, very clean. Everything was in its right place. Even the rags he used to wipe off his feet: He always kept them well washed. If they got torn, he would sew them up. He didn’t let anything go to waste.

So try to have this attitude in all your activities. When you’re training the mind, the mind is there not only when you meditate. It’s the same mind that goes through the day: what you do, what you say, how you do your chores. Those are the areas where you show the qualities of your mind. Those are the areas where they’re also being developed. If you’re developing sloppy, lazy habits in your day-to-day chores, those habits are going to get in the way of your meditation. If you learn to be meticulous and neat, those habits will come help your meditation — because the mind is like a large tree. Some trees — like banana trees — have only one shoot at the end. They grow very fast but don’t give much shade. The trees that give a lot of shade are the ones that grow lots of branches.

There’s a lot to be covered in training the mind. It’s not just a matter of mastering one single technique. I was once asked the question, “How does someone who’s mastered meditation overcome the problem of pride?” After all, you’ve been able to master this technique; you’re pretty sharp. Well, that happens mainly in places where everything is reduced to a meditation technique, in

meditation centers where the people who meditate don't have anything else to do. Everything gets channeled into that one shoot at the end of the banana tree. Things may happen fast, but there's no shade. It's an incomplete training.

The complete training has to go all around. It has to deal with the way you treat other people, how you handle difficult situations. Your whole life is part of the training, and in the course of the whole-life aspect of the training, you need to learn how to see how you've been sloppy, how you've been stupid, how you've been ignorant, how you've been thoughtless and careless. If you don't see those things, you're not going to learn anything. The experience is chastening instead of pride-inducing. When the training is complete, every aspect of the mind has been trained, so that you're skilled at all kinds of activities, with an attitude nicely balanced between humility and pride.

Once, during my very first year with Ajaan Fuang, the time came for the *kathina*, which was the big event of the year. Lots of people were going to come from Bangkok. Some of them would have to be housed for a night or two before the *kathina*, and everybody would have to be fed. I had a dream a few nights before they came that Ajaan Fuang had a huge closet with lots of different hats. He would go into the closet and come out with one hat on, then go back in and come out with a different hat on. And sure enough, in the preparation for the *kathina*, they had to put up bamboo sheds and they had to arrange for the extra kitchen areas — lots of different tasks — and he was good at supervising them all. As later he told me, "Practicing the Dhamma is not just being good at sitting with your eyes closed. It involves learning how to be skillful in everything you do." This attitude that wants to be skillful: That's what's going to see you through lots of different problems. If you don't give a damn about things outside, your mind is going to be a "don't-give-a-damn" kind of mind inside as well. It gets apathetic, careless.

But if you make up your mind that whatever chore falls to you, you're going to try to do it skillfully, then you develop what are called the four bases for success: the desire to do it skillfully; the persistence that sticks with it till you've mastered it; intentness, paying a lot of attention to what you're doing; and analysis, using your powers of discernment to see what's not yet right, trying to figure out how to get around problems, how to solve them. This fourth factor also involves ingenuity — all the active qualities of the mind. The texts talk about these four bases of success specifically in conjunction with concentration, but a common teaching all over Thailand is that if you want to succeed at anything,

you've got to develop these qualities of mind and apply them to whatever you have to do to succeed. And regardless of what areas of your life you develop them in, you can take them and apply them to other areas of your life as well.

So see every aspect of your life as an opportunity to train the mind. If you want to develop good strong powers of concentration, it's not just what you do while you're sitting with your eyes closed. It's how you tackle any activity: learning how to be focused on that activity, learning to be strict with the mind when it starts wandering off. That way the mind is right there; you learn how to keep it right there no matter what you're doing. And when the time comes to sit down with your eyes closed, well, you're right there. You don't have to go chasing the mind down. So try to see the practice as a seamless whole. The word *bhavana*, as I said, is "to develop." You can develop your mind in any situation.

Don't think that the important insights are going to come only when you're sitting with your eyes closed. There are many references to this point in the Canon. One nun's mind finally came to a good solid concentration while she was washing her feet. And the poem in which she tells of how this happened is interesting. After she washes her feet, she goes into her hut and does all the things you're told to do in the Vinaya. She checks the bed first before she sits down on it and then she takes a pin and pulls the wick out of the lamp to put out the light. And as soon as the fire went out, she said, that was the moment of her Awakening. She said the liberation of awareness was like the liberation of the fire.

So it's not only when you're sitting with your eyes closed that important things can occur to the mind, important insights can come, or that the mind can gather into one. It's amazing. Sometimes the mind can really get concentrated while you're just doing a chore if you approach the chore with the proper respect. So remember that this tree of ours has lots of branches and they're all growing at once. Things may seem slow because they're all growing at once, but at least you're getting a tree that offers really good shade once it's grown. That's what it means for the mind to be well-trained: trained all-around. You can watch the mind in its activities, so you want to make sure that it's well trained in everything it does.

A Sense of Entitlement

April 12, 2004

Some of the chants we recite in the evening are meant to inspire us, and others are meant to warn us, to keep us grounded, to make sure we don't get lost in abstractions, in ideas that are not all that relevant to where we are.

Like the chant on the requisites. It's there to remind us — day in, day out — that when you're born, you're born with a big lack. You've got this body that needs food, needs clothing, needs shelter, needs medicine, and you're not born with an entitlement to those things. If you were really entitled to them, they would come on their own. The fact that they *seem* to come on their own when we're children is because our parents are looking after us, but that means *they* have to go out and do extra work just to provide for this big, gaping hole they've just given birth to. And so as you grow up as a human being, you not only carry this huge load of needs around with you, but you also carry a big debt to the goodness, the work of other people. It's important to keep that in mind.

Part of the reason for that chant is to give a sense of *samvega*. You think about all the suffering that goes into making sure that we have the food we need to keep this body going, the clothing, the shelter, the medicine — not only from the work we ourselves have done to get these things, but also all the work and sacrifices that other beings make so that we can have them.

So we come to the practice with a huge debt. And the Buddha encourages us to have a sense of gratitude to everyone who's provided for us — materially and in terms of the Dhamma — because otherwise we get complacent.

There's a saying that gratitude is the sign of a good person. If you don't appreciate the goodness of other people, it's hard to make that extra effort needed to be a good person yourself. So stop and reflect every day on the debts you owe to other people and the various ways you might be able to repay those debts. This means that you should come to the practice not with a sense of entitlement but with a sense of how much you need the Dhamma practice to help compensate for the debts you've been accumulating over time.

Look at the monastery we have here. It's come about through the generosity of lots and lots of different people. They've been generous with their money, generous with their time, generous with their strength. Everything we have here is the result of somebody's generosity. One of the reasons we need to be really active in the practice, dedicated to the practice, not complacent in the practice, is because we've got this debt. As the Buddha once said, the only people who are really debtless in this world are the arahants. As long as we haven't yet reached that point, we still have a debt to other people, to the other beings all around us. Whatever way we can build goodness through generosity of our own, observing the precepts, through the meditation, is a way of helping to repay that debt.

At the same time there's the question of keeping this teaching alive. You need to have a sense of how precious this is, this teaching of the Dhamma. It's not that beings get to meet with the Dhamma every lifetime. There are whole eons where the world has no notion of the Dhamma at all. We were born in a time when the Dhamma is still alive. There are still people practicing. The world is not empty of arahants. So value your opportunity. Think of your debt of gratitude to all the people who've kept this teaching alive, and do what you can to keep it alive for the people who come after you.

When you read Buddhist history, it can sometimes be a pretty depressing project, seeing how people take the Dhamma and bend it to other needs, other agendas, other ideas. And yet there are always people who have a sense of the Dhamma's true purpose and work to bring the tradition back in line. But think of all the difficulties they go through, like Ajaan Mun. In his days the forest tradition had degenerated. It was mainly composed of monks wandering around reciting magical spells, selling amulets to people. It was a kind of business. But he took the Vinaya and combined it with the forest practice and so rediscovered the way to Awakening.

At that time the Thai Buddhist hierarchy had decided that the way to nibbana was closed. Nobody seemed to be going that way — that was the official line. They even had made a survey of meditation temples to prove it. And Ajaan Mun had to prove single-handedly that it wasn't true, so you can imagine what he was up against — not only his own defilements, but the disapproval of state and ecclesiastical officials. When you read his biography, you learn just a little about the hardships he went through. So try to develop a sense of gratitude for what he did, so that you can maintain the Dhamma in your practice as well.

Don't be guilty of the sort of changes in the Dhamma that someone else down the line is going to have to come along and straighten out.

Ideally we should come to the Dhamma not with a sense of entitlement, but with a sense of gratitude — a sense of how important it is and what's demanded of us to be equal to the Dhamma. When we have that attitude, our Dhamma practice really starts getting results. There's a lot demanded of us, but if we have a sense of conviction in the importance of the Dhamma, we'll be willing to make whatever effort's required.

Ajaan Fuang once told me that one of his prime motivations in practicing was that he was born into a poor family. He didn't do well in school, he was orphaned at an early age, and as he was growing up he just didn't have anything to show for himself as a human being. If you want to make your way in Thai society, you've got to have a lot of good connections. Well, he had no connections, and he didn't have anything else to fall back on. He realized that this was his only hope for any kind of happiness: to build up the goodness that Dhamma practice can provide. So he threw himself into it, and his single-mindedness was what enabled him to attain what he did.

As we come to the Dhamma we need a strong sense of its importance — and a strong sense of our need for the Dhamma. We come to it not because we're entitled but because we're in debt — to our parents, to all the other living beings who've contributed to the fact that we now have a body and are still alive. Lots of people talk about interconnectedness as a wonderful thing, but it carries a lot of IOU's.

Try to think about this in a way that makes you willing and happy to repay those IOU's — understanding the need to repay them, and happy that you've found a way to meet that need. Use that as a motivation to keep your Dhamma practice in line, to keep yourself devoted to the practice. That way you benefit. You get the full set of benefits that can come from the practice, and the people around you get a fuller sense of its benefits as well.

Right Livelihood

December 21, 2007

We're often impatient at the practice. We want to go straight to insight, straight to the solution of all our problems, so we can then go back home and get on with the rest of our lives. But you first have to put the mind in good shape before you can gain any insight. You have to feed it well: That's what concentration is all about. As the Buddha once said, if you don't have the pleasure and rapture that can come from at least the first jhana, you're always going to be tempted by sensuality. Even if you understand the drawbacks of sensual pleasures and sensual desires, if you don't have this alternative way of finding happiness you're going to go back to your old ways. No matter how much Dhamma you may have read or how precise your understanding of the intricacies of the Buddha's teachings, when the time comes to feed, you're going to go back and feed on the same old roadkill you've been feeding on all your life.

It's like Ajaan Chah's simile: Westerners, he once said, are like vultures. When they fly, they fly very high, but when they eat, they eat low. That's one of those quotes you don't normally see in books about Ajaan Chah, but it hits home. We in the West tend to overlook our need for the groundwork provided by concentration. The Buddha himself compared the happiness, pleasure, and equanimity that come from concentration to kinds of food. His image was of a fortress at the edge of a frontier, and different qualities in the path correspond to different aspects of the fortress. There's discernment, which is like a slippery wall that the enemy can't climb up. Learning is like a range of weapons to fight off the enemy. Mindfulness is like the gatekeeper who remembers who to let in and who not to let in. And jhana, he said, is like stores of food.

The first jhana is like water and grass. When you work up to the fourth jhana, you've got honey, butter, and ghee. These are ways of nourishing the mind and providing for its right livelihood. Even if you're not gaining any higher levels of insight, at least you're finding pleasure in a blameless place. This qualifies as right livelihood in the path. The more pleasure, the more a sense of wellbeing and stability you can develop from within, then the lighter your kammic footprint on

the rest of the world, the less harm you're causing as you search for your livelihood, both physical and mental.

So as you're practicing concentration, you're developing several factors of the path at once. There's right resolve, the resolve to renounce sensuality, to find a pleasure that's not involved with sensual passion; right mindfulness, which is the theme of right concentration; and right livelihood, looking after your needs in a skillful way. Right livelihood is the poor stepsister of the eightfold path. It's the factor that the Buddha hardly defines at all. He simply says the disciple of the noble ones avoids wrong livelihood and makes his or her living through right livelihood — which doesn't tell you much.

Part of this may have been simply a question of etiquette. There's only one passage in the Canon where the Buddha clearly comes out with a general statement condemning certain trades as wrong livelihood. He lists five — trading in poison, trading in weapons, trading in intoxicants, trading in meat, and trading in human beings as slaves — saying that the disciple of the noble ones avoids them. You don't set yourself up with a shop to sell alcohol, poison, weapons, meat, or slaves. But otherwise the Buddha is very circumspect when talking about other people's occupations.

There are two cases where people of questionable professions come to him. One is an actor; the other, a professional soldier. They say pretty much the same thing. "Our teachers who taught us to be actors," the actor says, "claimed that if you spend your life entertaining people with your imitations of reality, making them laugh, you're going to attain the heaven of laughter after death. What does Master Gotama have to say about that?"

The Buddha twice refuses to answer, but the actor keeps after him, and asks him a third time. So the Buddha finally says, "Well, it looks like I can't get anywhere with you by saying I don't want to answer that. So I'll answer you." He goes on to say that if, as you're acting, you give rise to greed, anger, and delusion in your audience, and your motivation for acting is greed, anger, and delusion, then after you die you're going to go to the hell of laughter — i.e., not the place where people laugh *with* you, but where they laugh *at* you. So the actor breaks into tears. The Buddha says, "See? That's why I didn't want to answer your question." The actor says, "No, I'm not crying because of what you said. I'm just crying because I've been deceived by my teachers for so long."

Similarly with the soldier. The soldier says, "I was taught that if you die in battle, you're going to go to the heaven of heroes. What does Master Gotama

have to say about that?” Again, the Buddha twice refuses to answer. When pushed for the third time, he finally says, “When you’re in the midst of battle, giving rise to the desire for the killing of other beings — ‘May these other beings suffer, may they be harmed, may they be killed’ — that mind state, if you die then, will take you to the hell of heroes who die in battle.” Like the actor, the soldier breaks into tears and the Buddha says, “See? That’s why I didn’t want to answer your question.” And the soldier, like the actor, says, “No, I’m not crying because of what you said. I’m just crying because I’ve been deceived for so long by my teachers.”

The Buddha’s etiquette here is interesting. He didn’t set out on a crusade against actors or professional soldiers or advertising people or whatever. Only if he was pushed would he condemn a particular occupation. Otherwise, what he would ask you to do is to reflect on your means of livelihood. Is it harming other beings? Does it involve lying? Does it involve unskillful mental states? If it does, maybe you should look for another occupation — which, of course, may take time. This may have been one of the reasons why the Buddha observed that etiquette, for a lot of people are stuck in their occupation. It’s going to take a while for them to disentangle themselves if they realize that their means of livelihood is unskillful.

But there’s another side to right livelihood, and that’s looking at your attitude toward what you consume. This is one of the reasons why we have that chant every evening, looking back on our use of the requisites during the day. Why did you use the requisites? Actually that chant is for when you didn’t reflect while you were using the requisites. Ideally, you should reflect while you’re eating: why are you eating now? When you put on your clothes, why are you putting these clothes on? When you fix up your house or your hut, why are you fixing it up in this way? When you take medicine, why are you taking this particular medicine now? What’s your motivation?

The chant reminds you of the ideal motivation: Wear clothing to protect yourself from the elements, to cover up the parts of body that cause shame. Take food not to put on bulk, not for the fun or the flavor of it. After all, those who provided the food that you’re eating — the farmers who worked, the animals who gave up their lives — didn’t provide it in fun. You take the food simply so you can continue practicing, so you can eliminate hunger pains and yet at the same time not overstuff yourself until there’s the discomfort that comes from eating too much. You’re not eating just for the flavor of the food; you’re eating for

the nourishment of the body, so that you can practice in ease. Your use of shelter should simply be to protect yourself from the elements and to provide a place where you can be quiet, find some privacy, so you can practice. And as for medicine, you use it to eliminate pain and to maintain freedom from disease, that's all.

When you think about these things, it forces you to look at your impact when you eat, when you buy clothing, when you buy any of these things and use them: What is your impact on the world? The fact that you're alive and breathing means that you have a lot of needs, and the needs can be met only by relying on others. What way can you rely on others so that you're not harming them or causing them unnecessary pain?

This reflection ties in with one of the important principles of what are called the customs of the Noble Ones, which is contentment with your material possessions. When you think in these ways, you find that you're buying less, using less, because you're looking elsewhere for your happiness. I.e., you're looking inside. This is where the concentration comes in. This is why concentration is an important element of right livelihood. It provides you the honey, the butter, the grain, and the other foods you need for the mind, for your true happiness deep down inside. At the same time, this happiness provides you with a good foundation for the insights that are going to come as you start looking at the various ways in which you keep on taking birth. Because, again, the fact you're taking birth is placing a burden on other beings, a burden on the world.

The insights you're going to need to stop that process can be pretty harsh. As the Buddha said, when you take food, think about the story of the couple who were going across the desert with their only child. They got more than halfway across the desert and ran totally out of food. They realized that if they didn't eat anything, all three of them would die. So they decided to kill their child and make jerky out of the baby: baby jerky. That way at least two of them would survive and then they could start a family again when they got to the other side of the desert.

Now, the Buddha said, what would be their attitude toward the food while they were eating it? Would they be eating it for fun? No, they'd be thinking with sorrow of what they had to do in this horrible circumstance. That, the Buddha said, is how you should regard physical food: not something you eat out of joy or

for the flavor, but simply to keep life going, realizing that your having to eat causes suffering, causes pain.

That's a harsh contemplation — one of many harsh contemplations in the Buddha's teachings. The only way the mind can stand up to that kind of contemplation is if you've got the strong sense of wellbeing that comes from nourishing the mind with right concentration. Otherwise, the insights that can come from meditation, if you don't have a good solid foundation like this, can be disorienting, destabilizing.

So as the foundation for your practice, you want to keep working on these skills. Appreciate the simple quality of getting the mind still, finding a sense of ease simply by the way you breathe; gaining a sense of wellbeing, rapture, equanimity when you need them. In this way, you nourish the mind with good food. That's right livelihood in the highest sense. It puts you in a position where, while you're still alive this time around, you weigh lightly on the world around you. And you're developing the skill so you don't have to come back and weigh the world down again. This is why the Buddha's teachings are not selfish. They're an act of kindness both for you and for the whole world around you.

Factions in the Mind

September 14, 2003

When you stop to look at your mind, you begin to realize that there's a whole committee in there: lots of different opinions, lots of different agendas. You see this especially when you're trying to get the mind to settle down. One part of the mind decides to focus on the breath, but other parts of the mind want to go other places and couldn't be bothered with anything as ordinary as the breath. So in the beginning, you have to learn how to strengthen the side of the mind that wants to stay.

You can do this in lots of different ways. First, you can remind yourself of why you're here, of all the good things that can come through staying with the breath: You develop mindfulness, you develop concentration, the mind gains a sense of inner peace when the concentration gets strong. You develop alertness: You begin to see your own actions a lot more clearly, and you sense the importance of their consequences. This is important, as it's the basis for heedfulness. And heedfulness is so important that it was the topic of the Buddha's last words. "Watch out," he said. When you practice, you have to be careful. You have to be heedful. You can't be complacent. This is because your actions are important.

Think about it: The Buddha could have said a few last words about something wonderful or grand: nibbana, limitless compassion, or emptiness. But instead, he focused on heedfulness — the principle that your actions are important and you have to be careful about what you do because actions can take you in all sorts of different directions. They have results.

And so, as you meditate, remind yourself that you're here to learn how to be a lot clearer about what's going on in your mind. The more steadily and consistently you can stay with the breath, then the more you see in terms of all the subtle politics going on in the mind: the part of the mind that wants to be heedful and the parts of the mind that don't. There are many different voices in there, after all, many different sides to any question, not just two. So, when you settle down to be with the breath, be prepared: Lots of other voices will be

pulling in different directions. And it's normal. Don't get discouraged. Try to strengthen the good voices by making the breath comfortable, so that there's an immediately felt sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing that comes just by sitting here breathing. It feels good to breathe in, feels good to breathe out. You don't have to force the breath, you don't have to hold it in, you don't have to count. Let the breath come in and out at whatever rhythm feels good for the body. If the rhythm keeps changing, fine — as long as it feels good. Be on top of each breath. Make sure it feels right for the body, coming in and going out.

As you do this, you get more and more sensitive, which means that you can get more and more precise in what you're doing. The more precise and sensitive you are, the more absorbing the breath becomes. The easier it is to stay here so that this mindful, alert faction of the mind gets stronger. It doesn't get kicked out so easily. Ordinarily, when the factions of greed, anger, and delusion take over the mind, they kick out the mindfulness and alertness; they don't want anybody around watching. It's like politicians when they're discussing a corrupt deal: They don't want journalists in the room; they don't want anybody to see or hear what they're doing.

You notice this when part of the mind wants to do something unskillful, something it knows it shouldn't be doing: It tries to kick out your alertness, kick out your mindfulness. It doesn't want to hear what they have to say. That's how it can then go ahead and do those things. But if mindfulness and alertness develop a strong hold here in the present moment, they can refuse to budge. They can stand in the way of any unskillful decisions.

This is why it's important to keep hanging on to the breath and allowing the breath to feel good, to feel clear in the different parts of the body. This is how you exercise mindfulness and alertness so that they grow strong. Wherever you can sense the breath, focus on that. Then let the different breathing sensations connect so that they feel all-around good. This gives mindfulness and alertness a really solid place to settle in. And in this way you can turn the fact that the mind is a committee to your advantage. In other words, when greed, anger, and delusion threaten to take over the mind, they don't get the whole mind. You have another faction of the committee that says "No. We don't want to go there, because we know better."

This is called having a sense of shame, a sense of compunction: a fear of the consequences of evil. Ordinarily, we don't like to hear about the word "shame," but it's important that we understand what the Buddha meant by the word

“shame.” It’s not being ashamed of yourself; it’s being ashamed of the idea of doing something you know you shouldn’t do. You realize that it’s beneath you. In this sense, shame is a result not of low self-esteem but of high self-esteem. You know better than to do those things. You’re not the kind of person who really wants to do those things. So when you have mindfulness and alertness on your side, that sense of shame becomes an important protector of the mind, a protector of your future.

The same with compunction, the fear of the consequences of doing evil: That’s a skillful type of fear. It’s wise. The unskillful part of the mind says, “I don’t care what the long-term consequences are. I want pleasure right now. I’m going to make my profits right now and run.” But a sense of compunction looks to the future and says, “I don’t want to go there. No matter how much fun this may be right now, even if I run I won’t escape the consequences.”

So when mindfulness and alertness have developed this beachhead here in the present moment and can stay right here with the breath, then these qualities of shame and compunction come and help, strengthen your heedfulness, strengthen your lack of complacency, strengthen the good members of the committee, the good factions of the mind. You’ve got a place where they can all band together and work in unison.

In the past, the good members of the committee were all separated. They didn’t work together. Like the hummingbirds at the feeder who can’t band together to fight off a bigger bird, they got beaten out by the other more forceful factions, the unskillful factions of the committee. But now you’ve given them a corner of the mind where they won’t budge, where they grow stronger and begin to take over. When they take over, it’s not that they’re going to abuse the other side. In fact, as these skillful members of the committee take over, the whole committee learns that it can live more and more peacefully with itself.

Having this corner of the mind helps you step back and see the mind for what it is, to see what’s going wrong. Without this corner here, you’re totally immersed in unskillful states and can’t see a way out at all. But if you remind yourself that the mind is a committee, then even though unskillful things are coming up in the mind, you remember that there can still be a part of you that keeps watching, keeps mindful, alert. By standing on the breath, you gain a better perspective: You’re not totally in your head; you’re also in your body. That takes you out of the back-and-forth of the thoughts in your mind. This separate perspective is what allows the mind to train itself.

As the Buddha said, training the mind is something you have to do for yourself. Other people can't do it for you. They can point out the way, but the actual work is something *you* have to do. There would seem to be a paradox there. If the mind were one solid unit, it wouldn't be able to teach itself anything new. If it were defiled, it would be totally defiled and wouldn't be able to clean up its own act. This is the assumption behind the idea that we can't do this work ourselves, that we need outside help and have to depend on some other, outside power. But the fact is that there are lots of different you's, lots of different minds in the mind. When you learn to turn that fact to your advantage — strengthening the good voices, not allowing them to get pushed out when unskillful states come in — you find that the mind can train itself. In other words, the good committee members can band together and start training the less skillful ones, the more short-sighted ones, teaching them to look at things in a longer perspective.

This is how you can bring the mind to a sense of unity, when all the different factions realize that it's in their best interest to undergo this training. They all start working together instead of at cross-purposes. This gives the mind strength. If it decides to work on a project, it'll see the project through. If it's faced with pain and difficulty, all the parts of the mind work together so that you don't cause yourself suffering.

These are some of the advantages that come from training the mind to stay with the breath. If you find it difficult to stay with the breath, if you can't quite get it comfortable yet, at least remind yourself that you're headed in the right direction. You're working on important skills here. Even though they may take time, whatever amount of time that it takes is well invested, well spent. That sense of conviction will see you through the difficult patches and remind you that they're not always going to be that way: They're just patches. If you stick with the training, you develop these qualities of the mind, which, at the beginning, seem to be pretty weak — mindfulness and alertness can seem awfully ordinary and very momentary — but when you get them working together, you find that they develop strengths you wouldn't have imagined before.

A Warrior's Stronghold

November 10, 2006

Sit with your back straight, facing straight ahead, and your eyes closed. Place your hands on your lap, right hand on top of your left, and notice your breathing. Where do you feel the breathing? What are the sensations in the body that tell you now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out? Focus on those sensations. Allow them to feel relaxed. There will be a certain amount of tension when you first meditate, because you're not used to focusing on one thing for long periods of time, especially something as subtle and immediate as the breath. For the most part, we're more used to focusing on our ideas and emotions, or on things outside. So it takes a while for the mind to get used to being at home, focusing on something inside the body.

Allow the sensation of the breathing to be as relaxed as possible. Think of the breath energy as something that already fills the body. As you breathe in, you're simply adding more breath energy, infusing it into the energy already there. When you breathe out, you're not trying to squeeze everything out. If all of the breath were squeezed out of the body, you would die. So try to find the right balance. At what point does an out-breath start feeling uncomfortable? When you sense that point, stop breathing out; start breathing in. At what point does an in-breath start feeling uncomfortable? Stop there and allow yourself to breathe out again. Learn how to surf the breath in the same way you'd surf a wave. In other words, try to maintain a balanced sense of ease in the body whether the wave tends right or left. That sense of ease is going to be your friend.

Without that sense of ease, the mind starts flailing around, grasping at all kinds of other things. The idea may seem strange, but the more ease you can create for yourself inside, the more you're actually creating a gift for the world around you. If you don't have this inner sense of ease and wellbeing, the mind starts grasping at things outside, latching on to things outside, hoping to build some kind of happiness there. That places a burden on other people. But when you're more self-sufficient like this, you're less grasping. You're creating less of a burden.

One of the images of a well-concentrated mind is of a lotus saturated with water. Some lotus flowers don't ever get up above the water. They just stay immersed under the surface, saturated with water from their roots up to the tip. Try to think of your body as being saturated in the same way with a cool sense of ease. That lotus can be your gift, both to yourself and to the people around you. At the same time, you're establishing a good basis within the body for a clear, mindful state of mind, an alert state of mind. All too often our emotions take over the body. When fear comes in, there's a reaction in your heartbeat. Hormones start getting poured into the blood, changing your heartbeat, changing the way you breathe, creating tension in the different muscles of the body.

When there's anger, when there's fear, all these emotions create changes in the body. They basically take it over. The mind then feels that it's been usurped, and it goes along with whatever the emotion is. It's like a coup. Anger comes in, and it may not be well thought through, it may not actually be in your best interest to act on the anger, but the anger seems to have seized power. So you go along with it. Then afterwards, you ask yourself, "Why did that happen? Why did I let myself fall for that?" The same with fear, the same with all of these other emotions: They seem to take over the mind.

They start by taking over the body. So your first tactic in learning how to counteract them is to get the body on your side. Get familiar with how good breathing feels. Then when another emotion comes in, you can realize that although the emotion may create a certain reaction in the body, it doesn't have to possess the whole body, just as it doesn't have to possess the whole mind.

Ordinarily, we tend to be unskillful in how we relate to our emotions. One of the important skills in meditation is learning more skillful ways of handling them. For the most part, we think we have to either give in to the emotion or else to deny that it's there, just totally repress it out of existence. Of course, repressing it doesn't really get rid of it. It just goes underground like "The Thing" and sends up tentacles someplace else. And simply giving in to the emotion doesn't get rid of it either. You simply turn it into bad kamma, which will come back and get you someday.

But as you meditate, you're learning alternative ways of dealing with these emotions, so that you don't have to give in to them, but at the same time you don't pretend that they don't exist. You admit that they're there, but you also admit that they don't have to take over the whole body. This requires concentration, it requires mindfulness, along with some discernment — the

discernment being the realization that just because there's an emotion in the mind, it doesn't mean that it's your true feeling about something. It's simply a feeling that came up, a desire that came up to react in a certain way.

But you have other desires as well, such as the desire not to do something foolish and unskillful. That's a desire to be cultivated and strengthened. One way of strengthening it is to give it its corner of the body as well. The hormones may be racing through your bloodstream, but you can still determine the way you're going to breathe. You can counteract what the hormones are demanding by consciously breathing in another way. It may not feel all that satisfying to have only one corner of the body, but sometimes a wise warrior will realize that he can't defend his whole territory. So you establish a base in one part and then, from that one part, you can eventually reclaim the rest of your body.

This also means developing the proper attitude when things are not going the way you'd like them to. Problems come up, and you'd rather not have those particular problems. Saunas get set on fire. You'd rather not have the sauna set on fire, but you don't give in to your regret for the sauna. You do what has to be done to put the fire out and keep it from spreading. Storms come in, knock down trees. You don't go running around outside trying to push the trees back up in the midst of the storm. You find a safe place to stay and wait until the storm is over. You tell yourself, "I'll survey the damage when the storm has passed, but in the mean time I'll just hunker down right here." Instead of getting upset about how much damage might be done, you focus on maintaining your safety and calm.

We've had a couple of really bad storms here at the monastery: so much wind and so much rain, and all you could do was find a safe hut where you were fairly sure the hut wouldn't get blown down on top of you. As for the rest of the orchard, it had to take care of itself until things were safe enough for you to come back outside.

Try to develop the same attitude toward emotional storms in your mind and your body. Keep thinking of the mind as a committee. There are lots of people in there, lots of ideas, some of which are helpful, some of which are actually destructive to your own wellbeing. You can't regard the destructive ones as your own true emotions or your own true ideas. They may be real, but they're not the "true you."

Ajaan Lee has a good way of thinking about these things. He says you have lots of germs and worms and other things in your body, so maybe these thoughts coming through your brain are actually *their* thoughts. After all, they're going

through your bloodstream, the bloodstream is going through your brain, so who knows who's responsible for thinking what thought? Just keeping that perspective in mind helps pull you back when you're tempted to jump right into the thought. You're not denying that the thoughts are there; you simply realize that you have the choice as to whether to take them on, to develop them. The same holds true when the body isn't feeling well.

Your meditation may not be going as well as you'd like it to, but you don't give up, you don't just throw it away. You just lower your immediate expectations. You lower your demands on the meditation. Again, like a skillful warrior: When you find that you can't defend the whole territory, you find one little corner that you *can* defend, and you take that as your stronghold.

This is why it's very useful to have a very fluid sense of yourself. As a meditator, you're not asked to give up your sense of self totally right from the start. You just learn how to use your sense of self more skillfully. Make it more adaptable. When some parts of the body are really painful, establish your stronghold in the parts that you can make more comfortable, through the way you breathe, the way you relax your muscles around them. Then, from this position of relative strength, if you have the energy, you can start looking into the pain.

Learn how to make the distinction between feeling sensations and body sensations. Body sensations are things like warmth, coolness, solidity, energy — what are called the four elements or the four properties. Feeling sensations are the fleeting sensations of pleasure and pain. Those are very different sorts of things — the feeling sensations and the body sensations — but we tend to glom them all together. In particular, if there's a pain you tend to glom it together with sensations of solidity, so that your knee is solid pain, or your head is solid pain. Then you start using the pained parts to do your breathing, which makes things even worse.

But when the mind is in the right position, with the right attitude, you can look into the pain, not with the idea of making it go away, but with the idea of understanding it: "Okay, which sensations in here are pain sensations, which ones are earth, liquid, fire sensations?" If you have to hold on to something, hold on to the body sensations, and let the pain go. Let it do its fleeting, flitting-around thing. Or, even better, hold on just to the awareness that's aware of these different sensations, the question that makes these distinctions, if you can separate the awareness and the question out. That's where discernment comes in.

If you don't have the energy to do this kind of questioning, at least maintain your sense of stronghold in another part of the body. Guard against the thoughts commenting on how long the pain or exhaustion has been going on, or how much longer it might go on. Don't think about those things, for they're not helpful at all. The helpful thoughts are saying, "How do I maintain my awareness right now? How do I deal with the sensation I'm feeling right now?" As for the sensation of the pain you felt two seconds ago, you can let it go. It's not there any more. All that's there is your memory of it and the stories you've built around it. As for how many more hours, or days, or weeks the pain is going to keep going on, don't think about those things. Otherwise, you weigh the present moment down with too long a stretch of time, too many burdens, so of course it's going to cave in. Give it just the duty of being with the present moment. Thoughts of who you were in the past or who you're going to be in the future are unskillful ideas of self right now. Adjust your sense of who you are to fit the amount of wellbeing you can actually maintain. That can be your stronghold.

So, learn to be a warrior. Sometimes warriors have to admit temporary defeat, sometimes they have to go into retreat, but they don't totally give in. They simply adjust their tactics to deal with the situation as it presents itself. Just like the situation in Thailand when England and France were gobbling up colonies: Thailand had to give up some of its provinces. It was either that or else give up its independence entirely. So the Thais were willing to make sacrifices in order to maintain at least something of their sovereignty. As a Thai saying goes, if you have to give up your arm to save your life, choose your life over the arm. There are times when the body is sick and you have to give up your sense of yourself as being strong and healthy — at least for the time being. "Okay, I'm sick. I've got to deal with this sickness with the tools I've got." Don't totally give in.

The same with your emotions: Sometimes your emotions get really strong, and you have to lie low. The emotion is there, but you don't have to identify with it. This is your alternative. You don't have to act on the emotion and you don't have to squeeze it behind a mental partition and deny that it's there. You admit that it's there and then just lay claim to another part of the mind, another part of the body, as your stronghold for the time being. That way, even though you're in reduced circumstances, you're not totally wiped out. You're still developing some very important habits: the patience, endurance, concentration, mindfulness, and discernment that will serve you in good stead no matter what the situation.

The Buddha never promised us that everything was going to be lovely in the present moment, or that all you have to do is think nice thoughts and the world will be nice in return. He keeps having us reflect on the fact that aging, illness, and death are normal. The world is swept away, he says. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There is no one in charge. But, he says, here are the tools for finding happiness in the midst of a world that's getting swept away all the time. These are your weapons; this is your stronghold. Just make sure that you maintain that heart of a warrior and the wisdom of a warrior who knows which battles are worth taking on, which are worth dropping, which ones are worth avoiding. That wisdom is what will see you through.

How to Be Alone

December 7, 2007

As a culture, we don't have much practice in being alone, even though modern Western culture is unusual in the amount of privacy it offers in its homes. Ever since the 19th century, people in the West have slept in private bedrooms more than at any other time in history, or any other culture in history. You'd think that that would help us develop some skills in being by ourselves. But that's very rarely the case. When you're alone in your room, you're not really alone. Back in the 19th century, when people started living in private bedrooms, sales in novels shot up. Now in the 21st they have all sorts of companions in their rooms: books, magazines, TV, or the Internet. And so with all these clamorous companions, we don't have much practice in being alone, looking after ourselves.

That passage we chanted just now: "May I look after myself with ease." It doesn't refer to just being physically at ease. It also means learning how to look after your own mind, getting a sense of how to correct its imbalances. This is one of the treasures that the Buddha's teachings have to offer, in that it gives you some pointers in how to look after yourself, how to be alone and not go crazy, how not to get off balance, learning how to be self-correcting, self-governing.

Several years back when the book *Into the Wild* came out, I was struck by how much the protagonist had to reinvent the Dhamma wheel in figuring out how to live an authentic life, how to be alone facing the wilderness with just the company of his own mind. He didn't have many good resources to draw on: a few books — a little bit of Thoreau, a little bit of Tolstoy — and a lot of ideas, most of which were untested. I couldn't help thinking that if he'd been born in Thailand, he might not have died, for they have a whole tradition — the Buddha's teachings — that acts as a storehouse of wisdom on how to be alone. And the Sangha provides an opportunity to learn directly from people who've had lots of time alone, leading a purposeful life, and have come out stronger as a result.

So it's good to look into the Buddha's teachings not only for techniques in the meditation, but also for the attitudes you need in looking after yourself. Now,

the techniques *are* important. They give you a good measuring stick for how things are going as you're alone; they give you something specific to do, a task to focus on, so as to create a sense of purpose over time, and of wellbeing in the present moment by being with your breath. At the very least, you learn how to approach from the physical side whatever mind state is coming in and oppressing you. Mind states all have an effect on the breath, but the breath can also have an effect on them. If you're not skillful, this could become a vicious circle. You start breathing in weird ways, and that puts you in a bad mood, and then the bad mood makes the breathing get even stranger, and you go spiraling down.

Working with the techniques of breath meditation is one way of cutting those vicious circles, giving you a handle on your state of mind. But it's also important that you use right view in learning how to step back from your state of mind and evaluate it. To begin with, right view allows you to see where your thinking has gone off course. And second, it allows you to realize that you don't have to be immersed in a mood. One of the basic principles of right view is the principle of kamma, and one of the principles of kamma is that we have freedom of choice in the present moment. Yet this is an area where the wrong views of our culture get in the way. We tend to think that our moods are our real self. We tend not to trust our thoughts because we know we've picked up a lot of ideas from the media and other people around us, but our moods and emotions seem to be genuinely ours, who we *are* in the present moment. This is where the Buddha's teachings on understanding yourself are important. You don't have to identify with your mood. There is always a spot in the mind that's just simply aware of these things. And you want to learn how to stand in that spot.

Again, the meditation is helpful in this regard because it teaches you to create a state of mind and then step back and look at it. As in Ajaan Lee's analogy of learning how to make baskets: You make a basket, then you step back and look at it. Is it too long? Too short? Is the weaving coarse and irregular? See what's not right and then bring that observation along when you make another basket, and then another one. If you can learn to look at your moods as baskets — i.e., not who you really are, but simply things you've created — then you can start working on the raw materials and make better ones. But it's important that you have this ability to step back.

One of the images in the Canon is of a person sitting down looking at someone who's lying down, or a person standing who's looking at someone

sitting down. In other words, you step back a bit, you're slightly above what's just happened, and you evaluate it.

That's the second part of the Buddha's approach: not only having a place to step back but also having good standards to evaluate things. For instance, when you're in a bad mood, there is a tendency — especially if you're in the West — to say, "Here I am. I'm finally being honest with myself and I'm miserable. I'm horrible. My life is going nowhere." We tend to think that that's getting down to the true facts of the situation, because it's so harsh. But why should we believe that? And in what way is it helpful? You might say, "Well, it's better to be realistic than living in fantasies," but your bad mood is just a mood. It doesn't guarantee the truth of what you see while you're in that mood. And it's also self-defeating, for as the Buddha points out, it's possible to change your mood and to create moods that are a lot more useful in the practice. That's why one of the steps in breath meditation is learning how to gladden the mind when it needs to be gladdened. In other words, see where the mood is leading you, and if you don't like the direction it's heading, realize that you're free to look at things in a different way. You're not committed to the mood; after all, it's not committed to you. It comes and goes without asking your permission, so you don't need its permission to push it out.

During my first years as a monk, this was a very important part of the training: not only having the breath meditation technique to deal with whatever was coming up, but also having the opportunity to talk with someone sane — Ajaan Fuang — who had a lot of experience in being alone and learning to gauge what was a healthy mood and what was an unhealthy one. He had learned that regardless of how true you might think the mood is, you've got to look at its effects. Where is it leading you? After all, we're here to follow a path. So you can ask yourself, what kind of path is a depressed mood? What kind of path is an unhealthy mood? It's not a decent path at all. It's a path downward, not the path you want to follow.

So again, remind yourself that these moods are not necessarily true; they're not necessarily you. They're like a set of clothing: You can choose to put them on or you can take them off. The breath provides you with a place to step back and look at yourself, the way you'd look at yourself in a mirror. The Dhamma gives you a set of standards for judging what looks good in the mirror, what doesn't, what's healthy and what's not — realizing that sometimes the things that we're supposed to abandon at the end of the path are actually a help along the way.

There's that sutta where Ananda talks about how desire is often helpful in the path, conceit can be helpful in the path — in other words the desire to do well, the conceit that says, "Other people can do this, why can't I?" Those are actually useful tools in the path.

All the skills we tend to associate with a healthy ego are also helpful in the path. For example, anticipation: learning how to anticipate danger — i.e., to see the danger in wallowing in a mood. In the Buddha's language, this is called heedfulness. Suppression: The skills that allow you skillfully to suppress moods that you know are not helpful. You don't *repress* the mood; you simply realize that you're not going to go running along with whatever mood comes running into the mind. If you see that it's an unskillful mood, you stand your ground and use the skills of the meditation to cut it off from its sources of strength. And you use the skills of shame and compunction — these are skills, if you know how to use them right — to remind you of why you don't really want to follow a mood that would lead you to do something unprincipled or harmful.

Another important ego skill is sublimation, which means finding another kind of pleasure, another way of looking at things, to replace your current mood with a better one. This is what jhana is all about: providing a harmless kind of pleasure that you can tap into at all times, to provide you with the food you need so that you don't go hungering after unskillful pleasures. Another skill is humor, the ability to laugh at your foibles — not in a nasty, sarcastic way, but in a good-natured, large-hearted way. The surest sign that you've dropped a mood is when you see how ludicrous it is. And then there's altruism, realizing that in learning to look after yourself, you're also helping other people. Remember the Buddha's famous sutta on the two acrobats, where they realize, "If I look after my sense of balance, and you look after your sense of balance, that's how we're going to get down safely from this pole we're standing on." In other words, remind yourself that it's not a selfish thing to know how to look after yourself; you're not just gazing at your belly button. You're actually providing help to others. If you can't look after yourself, you become a burden to others.

This is why the Buddha, in his instructions on breath meditation, included the ability to gladden the mind when it needs to be gladdened — both in terms of the way you breathe, and in terms of the way you learn to think and talk to yourself. This involves your ability to step back and use the breath as a vantage point on whatever the depressed mood might be, and in developing a set of values that help you to recognize that this is something you don't want to get

involved with. Actually, there's no limit to the number of the tools that can prove useful here: anything you've learned about to how to change a mood — by the way you breathe, by the way you look at things, by what you focus on, what you choose to just let go.

There are also the skills of steadying the mind when the new mood you're trying to create is still unstable. What can you do to make it more and more solid? And then there are the skills of releasing the mind, knowing how to free the mind from a relatively skillful mood to reach an even more skillful one. Even when you've developed a skillful mood, you can then say, "Okay, this can take me only so far. What kind of mood would take me further?"

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about a meditator who finds, as he's focusing on the breath, that there's a fever in his mind. So he needs to change his topic for the time being, to find something more inspiring, more uplifting. That could include reflecting on the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, or whatever you find inspiring that relates to the practice. Then finally, once you've got the mind in a much better mood, when its fever has subsided, you can go back to the breath, and the mind can really settle down. It can drop all that thinking and go to a place that's a lot more still, solid, and buoyant.

So when you find yourself overtaken by a mood, or if you're not really sure about how you should approach the meditation when things are going poorly, keep these points in mind. And you should also keep them in mind when things are going awfully well. We sometimes feel embarrassed to congratulate ourselves on how things are going, but that embarrassment doesn't help at all. Recognizing when the meditation is going well and learning how to appreciate when it's going well will give you a reference point. When you start getting discouraged about the whole process, you can remember that there *were* times when it went well. And it's really worth whatever effort it takes to get it going well again.

So to be able to look after your own mind and to thrive at being alone, you need a whole set of skills. You need a spot where you can step back and look at things, the right set of attitudes that help you gauge the situation for what it is, and then skills in creating and maintaining a better mood. This is how you look after yourself with ease. The skills that enable you to be more mature in general, also help make you a more mature meditator. In this way, as you meditate, you become your own best friend, instead of your own worst enemy. You learn how to handle being alone. And it's only when you can handle being alone that you can really handle being with other people. You don't get swept away by their ideas or

their moods, and you can actually become a source of stability in their lives as well.

So keep this in mind when, say, in the middle of an afternoon, things don't seem to be going so well. Get up and walk around a bit. Clean out the tool shed. Hike up the mountain. Anything that works. One of my students, a monk in Thailand, once said that he'd get restless sometimes when he was staying alone in the wilderness, so he'd hike over a few mountains, just to get rid of the restlessness. Anything that works in getting you out of an unskillful mood and into a more skillful one — one that's ready to settle down — is an important part of the meditation.

Love for the Dhamma

October 7, 2003

Back when Ajaan Mun was alive, scholarly monks would say of meditating monks, “What can they know? They sit with their eyes closed. What can they see?” They’re still asking that question today: “What can meditators see with their eyes closed?” Of course the answer is that they see their own minds. Scholarly monks would say, “Here we spend years looking through the books, and we still don’t fully understand them. How can you understand them by sitting there with your eyes closed?” The answer is that the real problems in life don’t lie in books. Books contain only the names of the problems. The real problems lie in the mind, which is why we sit here focusing the mind on the breath as a way of bringing the mind into the present moment, where we can watch it. We turn our gaze inward, instead of outward.

What do you see when you look outward? You see aging, illness, and death. You see other people’s issues: their good points, their bad points. You see the world around you: its good points, its bad points. But those aren’t the things that make a real difference in your life. The things that make a real difference are your decisions, the way you manage your own mind.

This is why contentment is such an important principle in the practice: contentment in terms of where you are, the situation in which you find yourself; contentment in terms of your various physical comforts and discomforts. However, in terms of the people around you, you need to find a group of admirable friends. Even if you find just one admirable friend, you’ve got a lot right there. That’s important.

Don’t practice contentment with your friends. If they’re not people who live by the Dhamma or who speak the Dhamma, if they’re people who engage in lying and stealing and divisive speech, abusive speech, and idle chatter, then you don’t want to hang around with them. As the Buddha said, “If those are the only people you can find, it’s better to go alone.” But once you’ve found a good admirable friend, a good community in which to practice, you should be willing to put up with a lot of hardships.

Think again of the time of Ajaan Mun. He was way out in the forest. People who wanted to study with him had to go walking on foot, many times not even sure they were going to find him, because he was frequently on the move. When someone showed up to practice with him, he was sure that that person really wanted to practice with him because that person had already put up with a lot of hardships, not only in finding him but also in staying with him.

Ajaan Fuang once expressed a similar idea. Back in the very earliest days of Wat Dhammasathit, it was very difficult to get there. The trip from Bangkok to Rayong took almost a full day, and it wasn't an easy ride. From the highway you had to go further on, six kilometers along a dirt road, muddy and potholed. He said that by the time people came out to see him, having gone through all that, he was convinced that they were really serious about listening to what he had to teach, so he'd be happy to teach them. He said that it was a lot better than the days when he lived at Wat Asokaram, on the outskirts of Bangkok. Anybody with time to kill could come out and try to kill his time, too. Who knew how serious they were, because it was so easy to get there.

A willingness to put up with hardships is an important part of the practice, but it's not just a matter of gritting your teeth and bearing with them. The hardships are essential in helping you gain understanding. When things aren't going well outside, where are you going to focus your attention? Well, you could focus outside and just get upset about things outside, but that doesn't accomplish anything. If you're wise, you learn from the hardships the lesson that you've got to focus your attention more and more inwardly. If you're going to find happiness, you've got to find it inside. This is why the great ajaans were able to find the Dhamma out in the forest: They had to.

We tend to have a romantic idea of the forest — peaceful, green, beautiful forest — because our idea of forest life has become awfully sanitized. Actually, there are a lot of difficulties there. There are dangerous animals — not just the tigers that seem romantic and exciting, but also the day-to-day things: the bugs and snakes and other animals that carry diseases. When you're surrounded by things like that, where will you turn? Our natural tendency is to want to look for happiness in terms of sounds, sights, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations, but when these things aren't all that pleasant, where do you turn? When you get sick and there's no doctor or medicine around, where do you turn? You have to turn within. Being able to keep the mind centered becomes a life-and-death matter. If you can find that sense of wellbeing within, if you can stir up those resources of

goodwill and discernment that you're going to need in order to live in the forest, in spite of the fact that things seem to be weighing in on you from all directions, that's where you really learn the strength of the Dhamma, the importance of the Dhamma as a refuge.

This forces you to choose your priorities: What's really important in your life? Physical comfort or the comfort of the Dhamma? Pleasant people who do things the way you like, or people who teach you the Dhamma, people who exemplify the Dhamma? A happiness that's based on things outside, or a happiness that comes from within? Difficulties on the outside really force these issues in a way that pleasant surroundings don't. Your realization of this, and your willingness to act on that realization: That's what really makes a Dhamma practitioner out of you — when you finally decide that you're not going to hold anything back, that this really is what's most important in life, and you're going to go at it without reservations.

The Buddha gives the image of an elephant going into battle. The elephant fights with his front feet, fights with his back feet, fights with his front quarters and back quarters, but he protects his trunk all the time. He isn't willing to use his trunk because his trunk is his most sensitive part. The elephant trainer sees that and realizes that this elephant hasn't really given himself to the king. It's the same when you balk at discomfort: It's a sign you really haven't given yourself to the practice. The willingness to put up with discomforts, to thrive on them: That's the mark of a true practitioner, someone who really has what they call *dhamma-chanda*, desire for the Dhamma, and *dhamma-rati*, love for the Dhamma. This is what makes all the difference in your practice. If you hold back from the practice, it's going to hold things back in terms of the results you're going to receive.

We miss out on these results because our minds keep flowing out. The Buddha talks about *asavas*, which can be translated as “effluents,” both in the sense that they flow out, and in the sense that they're not especially clean. The force of these currents that come flowing out of the mind can drive us all over the place. Sensual desire, views, ignorance: These currents come flowing out of the mind, and we tend to ride with them. You don't really realize how strong they are because you don't try to withstand them. As a result, they can push you all over the place. Only when you decide to turn around and look at them as the main issue will you be able to work free from them. The problem is that they keep pointing outward and saying, “Look. See that over there,” and that thing over

there is something you want or something you hate. They keep deflecting attention away from themselves.

They're like politicians. Politicians do their dirty work and then they say, "See that person over there? He's doing something horrible." They get you all excited about the other person so you don't notice what *they're* doing. This is the way the mind operates. These *asavas* keep flowing out, flowing out, pushing you in all kinds of directions. To withstand them, as the Buddha says, you have to create an island where that flood doesn't overwhelm you. Even if you can't yet find the ultimate island of the transcendent, you build a temporary island with mindfulness and concentration, so that you're not pushed around all the time. That means taking a stance where you are.

Sometimes, taking a stance where you are requires making some sacrifices. But that's where you make your choice: whether you want to make that sacrifice or just continue going with the flow. Going with the flow seems easy because it's more habitual, but actually there's an awful lot of suffering in going with the effluent flow. You never know where it's going to push you. Like a flooding river, it sometimes hits you with logs and debris, or throws you up against a stone wall. But as you take your stance on your island of right here, right now, even though it may seem more difficult, you begin to get used to it and you realize that you wouldn't want to live any other way. You begin to appreciate the force of the effluents. You begin to see how they push you around, and you see the suffering that comes as a result. That's when you realize that you made the right choice not to continue with your old ways, sloshing around in the world, but actually taking a stance and keeping it solid.

So, it requires powers of resistance. We usually use our powers of resistance to resist things, people, situations, outside. What we've got to do is learn to resist the push that comes from within, the push that makes us want to focus on things outside, that distracts our attention from the real issues bubbling up in the mind. That's the other translation for *asava*, "fermentation." These things come bubbling up, and who knows where they're going to take you if you give in to them?

As you begin to take your stance, you come to see the value of not following through with those fermentations — and you see the value of contentment. You see that once you make your choice, you're going to maintain your stance here as a person who loves the Dhamma more than you love comfort or whatever the defilements are clamoring for. That's when the Dhamma really shows what an

excellent thing it is, what a worthwhile thing it is, why it's the sort of thing you can give your whole life to. Ultimately the teaching asks nothing less than that: that you give yourself totally to the practice. But what it gives in return is more than a life, far more than worth the effort you give it.

The Buddha once said that if you could make a deal that someone would spear you with a hundred spears three times a day — morning, noon, and night — for a hundred years, with the guarantee that at the end of the hundred years you would gain Awakening, that would be a deal worth taking. Otherwise, think of all the eons of endless sufferings involved in repeatedly coming back again and again. He said that when you attained Awakening as a result of that deal, you wouldn't even think that you had attained it with pain and suffering. It would have come with joy. So, when you run into hardships in your daily life, compare them to the three hundred spears a day. Put things into perspective. That'll help keep you on course.

Universal Truths

June 13, 2007

When you meditate during the Dhamma talk, 99% of your attention should be with your breath. Let the talk be in the background — because the Dhamma is found inside the mind. The Dhamma in words is just pointers. As you listen to the talk, remind yourself that the words are pointing inside your mind. If you're inside your mind paying attention to what you're doing, you're already at the right place. You don't need the talk. If you find yourself wandering outside, you'll run up against the talk and it'll point you back in, to where the real problem is: ignorance.

Real ignorance is not ignorance of words or principles. It's ignorance of what's going on in the mind. In particular, it's ignorance of how you're causing yourself suffering. In a broader sense, it's ignorance of four noble truths: ignorance of where there's suffering right now and of what you're doing to cause the suffering; ignorance of what you could be doing to put an end to the suffering and of what the end of suffering would be like. Those are the four things you could be paying attention to. They're things that are happening right inside. They're not happening in the words. The words simply point to these things, and especially to your experience of suffering, something that nobody else is experiencing. That suffering is as close as you get to really purely personal experience. There's no way you can take it out and show it to us. Scientists studying your brain can see all sorts of indicators that you might be in pain, but they can't actually see your suffering. And there's no way you can compare your suffering to anyone else's, to see who's suffering more, exactly what it tastes like, or what it feels like. But it *is* something you can know for yourself. So you should pay attention to it.

What this means is that the four noble truths are not some abstract teaching whose truth is peculiar to India 2,600 years ago. They're things happening right here, right now, and they're happening very directly in your awareness. To chip away at that ignorance, you start by focusing on something more obviously happening right here, right now: the breath. In the Buddha's analysis of suffering,

ignorance conditions fabrication. Bodily fabrication is the breath. If you breathe with ignorance, it can be a condition for suffering. If you breathe with knowledge and awareness, it can help cut through suffering. It can help you see your ignorance more clearly. As you see your ignorance more clearly, you're replacing it with knowledge. So when you're focused on the breath, learning to breathe comfortably, allowing the mind to relate in a comfortable way with the breath, you're taking a stand against ignorance. And all the ignorant thought processes that go on through the day: You're putting up a resistance to them so that you can understand them. It's through understanding them that you can go beyond them, transcend them.

These principles are universal. That's why the Buddha called them *ariya-sacca*, which we translate as noble truths. But the word *ariya*, in addition to meaning noble, also means standard, in the sense of a universal standard. So these truths are not only noble, they're also universal standards. They apply to all of us, with no exceptions. They're something we all have in common. We each experience suffering and the cause of suffering for ourselves alone, but the pattern of our suffering is something we have in common, which is why the path to the end of suffering is universal. It doesn't matter what country you come from, what your background, what your language. The path works across the board if you apply it in all fairness, if you realize that this is something that applies to you as much as it does to anyone else.

Most of us like to think of ourselves as exceptions to the rule. We like to think that it's going to be different for us somehow, especially when you hear of all the effort that the various *ajans* put into the practice. We'd rather not have to do all that work. We think that maybe things should be easier for us because we're better educated, or maybe we know more in our culture. Well, no, we don't. Our problems are just the same as theirs. They may be dressed up a little bit differently in each case, but at their root they're all the same. Ajaan Fuang once quoted Ajaan Mun saying that people are all alike, but then if you look a little deeper you see that they're really not, but then when you look deeper still, you see that they really are. Ajaan Fuang's comment on that was: Take that and think about it for a while. There are some differences, but what we have in common is what's really important.

Like the chant we had just now. Aging, illness, death, and separation: These are things we all have in common. The chant is a little bit lacking in that it simply reminds you that *you* are subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to

death. Or as in the Thai translation, these things are normal for you. You're subject to being separated from things that you love. Life starts out, you're always learning new things, gaining new things, but then it reaches a point where they all start going away. What you do have left is your actions. You will fall heir to what you do, say, and think. And the results depend on whether what you do, say, and think is skillful or not.

As the Buddha said, thinking about these truths as they apply to yourself keeps you from doing unskillful things. You realize, "My gosh, if I allow myself to think a lot of unskillful stuff today, the results are going to seep out into my words; they're going to seep out into my actions. Then I'll start not just thinking unskillful things, but also doing and saying unskillful things. That all begins to pile up." Do you want that? No. So these reflections are meant to keep you in line, to keep you from doing harmful things to yourself, harmful things to other people. They teach you restraint.

But the original sutta in which this chant is found doesn't stop just there. It goes on to recommend that you remind yourself that these things don't just apply to you, they apply to everybody, to all levels of being. No matter where you go — this lifetime, the next lifetime, whatever the realm, all beings that have been, all beings that will be, whether they're living, whether they're dying, whether they're being reborn: These principles apply to all of them. And, as the Buddha said, when you think about that, it not only prevents you from doing unskillful things, but it gets you on the path. You finally realize that there's no other escape from these principles of suffering and its cause. And the path has to be the same for everybody, so that the cessation would be the same for everybody. You are not an exception. No matter where you go, whether you would like to be reborn as a brahma, or to come back as a human being who's maybe a little bit more wealthy — maybe a lot more wealthy, better looking, more powerful: You would still be subject to these same truths, no matter what.

That's meant to give rise not just to restraint, but also to a sense of *samvega*, something that goes deeper: a realization that the way you've been living your life really is going nowhere. The way most people live their lives goes nowhere. The only "somewhere" you can go is out. Even that's not a place, but still it's a direction. Otherwise life has no direction at all. It just wanders around, looking at this for a while, looking at that for a while — like the map charting the way a dog wanders around the neighborhood, sniffing at this, sniffing at that,

wandering over here, rolling in this, rolling in that. It really goes nowhere in particular at all.

But if you accept that these truths are universal, then the Buddha's ready to show you the universal way out. He doesn't teach just good or bad karma, or skillful or unskillful karma. He says that there are gradations of skillful karma. In particular, there's the plain old skillful karma that keeps you in the cycle, and then there's the karma that puts an end to karma, that gets you out of the cycle. That's the path — the path that cuts through the ignorance, the path that cuts through the craving that causes suffering. That's the way out.

So it's up to us to decide whether we still want to dabble around, to roll around in a few dead squirrels, or whether we've had enough and want out. If we want out, then the path is all laid out, from right view on through right concentration, which means that you try to endow your concentration with all the factors of the path. Virtue, concentration, discernment: All these things should come together in your practice.

So as you focus on the breath, try to do it in a virtuous way. In other words, do it with restraint. Remind yourself, you can't go wandering off, dabbling in this, dabbling in that. You've really got to be true to the theme of your concentration. And your concentration should be discerning: Which ways of focusing on the breath make the mind uncomfortable? Which make the breath uncomfortable? Which ways of focusing, which ways of thinking about the breath, which ways of labeling and understanding the breath help make it more comfortable, easier to stay here so that it does become your home? — so that no matter where you go, you have this home inside, this nourishment on the path. That's how your discernment works. You want to bring all of these qualities together. If you leave any of them out, then the path is incomplete. When it's not complete, it can't do its work.

So you give it all of your mind. The word for "mind" in Pali — *citta* — also means the quality of really being intent on what you are doing. And *citta* in this second sense is one of the elements of right effort, one of the bases for success. So give this practice your whole mind, your whole heart, your full intent, so that the results will be full and complete as well.

Stupid about Pleasure

September 27, 2007

When it comes to the issue of pleasure, we prefer both/and. We don't like either/or. The more ways we can find pleasure, the more types of pleasure we can find, the better. After all, that's a lot of what pleasure is about: the variety. We don't like the idea of having to be stuck with one particular type of pleasure, or of having to abandon some of the things we already like for the sake of something else we also like. We want to have it all. As the Buddha once said, even if it rained gold coins we wouldn't have enough to satisfy people's desire for sensual pleasures. We always want more and more. That's why we tend to be pretty stupid about the issue of pleasure.

Psychologists have shown that even when people know the drawbacks of a certain activity they like, they still go back to it again and again and again. Even when they know they have better things to do — more lasting, more solid forms of pleasure they can work toward — there are still some fleeting pleasures they can't let go of. So it's not the case that when you find a better pleasure, your attachments to your old, lesser pleasures simply fall away like leaves off a tree. The tendency in the mind is to keep trying to gather more and more: adding new pleasures to the stock of old pleasures we want to keep in store.

You can see this even among some of the least advanced of the noble ones: the stream-enterers. The Buddha had to counsel them to be heedful. That was his last instruction. Of all the monks gathered at the Buddha's passing away, the least advanced were stream-enterers. And yet the Buddha had to counsel them to be heedful. There are other places in the Canon where he explicitly states that even a stream-enterer can be heedless. After all, when you've reached that level you know for sure that there's a deathless, that you're destined for nibbana. You'll have at most only seven more lifetimes and they're all going to be human lifetimes at the very least. And a sense of security can develop around that thought. Because of that sense of security, it's possible for a stream-enterer to become complacent — to say nothing of people who've simply experienced jhana, or right concentration. Just the fact that you've encountered the really

refined pleasures of right concentration doesn't mean that you automatically let go of your attachments to other forms of pleasure. The principle of both/and applies here as well. People want to enjoy their concentration along with all the other pleasures they've managed to gather up in the course of their lives.

This is why we also need discernment to remind us that there are a lot of important areas where things are either/or. In particular, discernment is needed to see the drawbacks of many of the old pleasures we've been wallowing in. This is a lesson we resist. One, we don't like to be told that we've been engaging in harmful or unskillful behavior. And two, the mind has an incredible tendency to put up walls to screen out the negative sides of our pleasures. Because we like our pleasures so much, we resist acknowledging their drawbacks.

I was talking recently to a monk who had been to the police morgue in Bangkok, where they allow monks to come and observe autopsies. He saw the doctors working in the morgue very efficiently, going through bodies, opening them up, opening them up, with all the guts and stuff spilling out. And he wondered: How do they still manage to go home and sleep with their wives and enjoy their old sensual pleasures? Then he walked into their office and saw girlie calendars all over the walls. That's when he understood. They were determined to maintain the perception of the beauty of the body in spite of what they were seeing every day. The side of the human mind that wants to maintain its old attachments: It doesn't give them up easily. It does everything it can to hold on. You give things up only when you really see that there's a direct connection between suffering and the pleasures you've been enjoying — and that there's a better alternative. Only then will the mind begin to let go.

This is the duty of discernment: to see the drawbacks of these things. This is why right concentration on its own, or jhana on its own, is not enough to cut through your other attachments. Simply because you can sit here and be very blissful, very equanimous, doesn't mean that you're going to see the connections between unskillful pleasures and their negative consequences. That insight requires an act of determination. You really have to be heedful to remind yourself that these issues are either/or. You have to work at developing the strength and determination of discernment that can see this clearly.

Ajaan Chah, in one of his talks, refers to the knowledge of the three characteristics not as a truth, not as a form of discernment, but as a strength. That's what it is: a strength. It gives you a solid place where you can stand outside your attachments and really look at them. For the most part, we just

jump into our attachments, jump into our pleasures, and totally lose perspective. When they slosh around, we get sloshed around as well. But being able to step back from these things gives us a solid place to stand. And that solid place to stand is a strength in the mind. It helps us to resist the temptation to go jumping back in.

So this is a theme you have to contemplate over and over again: the theme of either/or, together with the theme of the connections between the pleasures you enjoy and the drawbacks they carry in their wake. This is why the path has right view right at the very beginning, and why the Buddha said that of all the various strengths in the mind, the strength of discernment is what holds the others together. The image he gives is of building a house. You're putting up the beams to form the roof, but only when the ridgepole is in place are the other beams secure. Up to that point they can still sway back and forth. They're still not quite solid. But when you finally get that ridgepole up across the top, everything fits together properly and stays solid.

The ridgepole is discernment. Until discernment is strong, everything else — your conviction, your persistence, your mindfulness, your concentration — can sway back and forth. You may like your concentration, but you can also like whatever else life has to offer. You treat your life like a big flower garden or a vast buffet where you can choose all the things you want. That's your preferred attitude. You come to your senses only when you clearly see that things are either/or. The more you let your mind go wandering around in sensual desires, the harder it is to get back, the harder it is to turn the concentration into something transcendent. Even when you've hit the transcendent for the first time, you're still not totally safe. There can still be the complacent thought that this is good enough. You've reached the point of being a noble one for sure, guaranteed against falling into the lower realms, guaranteed that nibbana will be attained within seven lifetimes. So it's possible to be complacent even on that level. Your work on discernment still isn't complete.

So while we practice, we need to develop this added strength, the strength of discernment. It helps us see connections between our pleasures and their consequences — and it also helps us to see where there's a disconnect: where you have to choose one form of pleasure over another.

There's a passage in the Dhammapada: "When you see a greater form of happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser form of happiness, the wise person abandons the lesser form for the sake of the greater." Note that not

everybody does that. It's only the wise person who does. Someone who once translated this verse said that this couldn't possibly be the meaning of the verse because it's so obvious. Everyone knows enough to abandon the lesser pleasure in favor of the greater. But that's not really the case. Very few people do this. Very few people see that it's an either/or. They want the both/and/and/and/and/and. This is because we're so stupid around pleasure. Sometimes we intentionally make ourselves stupid. We don't want to see the connection between our pleasures and their drawbacks. We don't want to see the way one pleasure fights with another, is inconsistent with another. Even when it's right before our eyes, we refuse to see.

So while it's important that we develop concentration, we also need to develop the discernment that makes it *right* concentration, that keeps it on track, that helps you to appreciate it for what it is. The pleasure of concentration is one of those rare pleasures that has no drawbacks. It may be shaky in the beginning, and that's probably one of the reasons why when we start out we don't want to place all our hopes on it, because we know how difficult it is to attain. But later on, when it becomes easier and more consistent, we can get complacent about that, too, thinking that we can tap into it whenever we want. So you have to develop the discernment, the strength in the mind that can help overcome both forms of complacency, both reasons for wanting everything to be both/and. As long as you're still on the path, the either/or has to be kept in mind. Only the wisdom of either/or can get you beyond.

The Taste vs. the Reality

August 1, 2007

In India they have an interesting theory about why people enjoy art. It's based on a distinction between an actual emotion and the taste of the emotion. They say that people enjoy art — this includes drama, music, literature, all the fine arts — because in looking at the depiction of a particular emotion they don't actually experience the emotion. They taste it. The taste is always pleasant even when the emotion being depicted is very unpleasant: fear, anguish, or sorrow. If it's well portrayed, the audience likes the depiction because they like the taste. They taste, for example, the taste of grief, which is not grief itself, but compassion. The taste of fear is not fear, but excitement. So we enjoy art not because we're actually experiencing the emotion being depicted, but because we like the taste.

This distinction is useful to keep in mind when you contemplate your thoughts, especially when you're sitting here meditating. Sometimes focusing on the breath starts to lose its appeal. You lose interest. Even when you get nice long periods of bliss and wellbeing, part of the mind gets bored. It wants some action; it wants to taste some emotions. So you start thinking about all kinds of other things. But you have to remember that no matter how attractive and tasty those alternatives — all the different worlds that you can create in your mind — may seem, actually living in them would be pretty miserable. So don't get beguiled by the taste.

We had an incident of this in my own family. A relative of mine was a novelist, and her novels were pretty melodramatic. She liked stories filled with scandalous surprises: murder, incest, intrigue, infidelity. They made for very interesting stories. But when in her own life she encountered some marital infidelity, it was the end of her. The sorrow caused her death. So it's one thing to imagine these things, but it's another thing to live them. Always keep that in mind.

Even the stories, the narratives we like to make about our own practice, about the progress we expect, about how we'll attain concentration, and from

concentration we'll quickly move on to insight, and there it will be — liberation: We like those stories because of the taste. We like to read the stories of the ajaans, because the stories are contrived in ways to make them very compelling. They're designed to make you want to practice. What you miss in the stories, though, are the long days where nothing happens at all, or the long fallow periods in the meditation: meditations that may have been perfectly pleasant but with no ups and downs, or meditations that were actually unpleasant because the mind was unwilling to settle down. Those are the parts not depicted in the books, but when you actually meditate, everyone's bound to experience those things.

So you've got to keep a perspective on your thoughts, on the stories you like to tell even about your own practice. We're here to train the mind, and part of training the mind involves doing things over and over and over again: pulling the mind away from distraction over and over again, keeping the mind with its object over and over again, taking a skill that you develop while you're meditating and learning to apply it in daily life over and over again. That may not be exciting or compelling, and the mind will have a tendency to rebel sometimes, but you have to ask yourself when you're rebelling, "Where are you going?" If you think of dream worlds or pleasant worlds where you could be right now, ask yourself, "What would it actually be like to be there?"

There's a great story in Ajaan Lee's autobiography where he tires of being a monk and starts thinking about disrobing. So one night he decides to think seriously about disrobing: what's actually going to happen, what it's really going to be like. He starts out with a story that sounds pretty good. He gets a job and then a raise in pay. He's doing pretty well — so well that he decides he wants the daughter of a nobleman for his wife. That, in reality, would have been pretty unlikely. Ajaan Lee was the son of a peasant in the northeast. It's very unlikely that he would have gotten anywhere near the daughter of a nobleman. But he was able to contrive a story whereby he actually meets one, and she gets attracted to him, and they end up getting married.

That's when reality sets in. The daughter of a nobleman is probably very delicately brought up, yet for the family to survive she would have to work. So she gets a job, and she has a child, but with the stresses of work and pregnancy she dies soon after childbirth. He's left with the kid, and her parents want nothing to do with him. So he hires a woman to be the wet nurse. At first, she's good with the kid, and after a while she works herself into his affections. They eventually get married. But then she has her own child and she starts playing

favorites. That's when it gets really bad. He comes home from work at night and the mother has one version of the day's events, the first child has another version, and the second child has still another version of the story. They're all fighting. Ajaan Lee feels like he's being pulled in three different directions. He thinks to himself, "Boy, I wish I were back as a monk." Then he realizes, "Of course, I'm still a monk." That puts the issue of disrobing in a different light. In other words, he talked himself out of doing something foolish by allowing his dreams of disrobing to get real.

So this is one way of dealing with the allure of distracting thoughts. Ask yourself, "If I really lived in that situation, what would it be like? What would the constraints of that situation be?" When you think of the different worlds you could be going to, the worlds of lay life, the worlds of being a monk in the forest in Thailand: While you're thinking of those worlds, they seem like open opportunities. But you have to realize that each of those worlds has its constraints, its constrictions. And the taste of the thought is very different from the actual emotion of being there.

So if a particular thought is really beguiling, ask yourself what it would really be like to go to that particular state of being. You'd probably find yourself wishing you had some quiet time to be by yourself. But here you already have quiet time to be by yourself, so make the most of it. If thoughts of boredom come up, question those thoughts. This desire for playing around: There's a sutta in which the Buddha says that this is why beings fall from the bliss of the higher realms. They start getting wanton and reckless. They see some of the lower realms. They say to themselves, "What does that taste like?" It's through their carelessness and wantonness — wanting to play around a little bit, wanting to sample new tastes, wanting a change of scenery — that they fall and then just keep on falling. The universe evolves not because of a divine plan, but because of recklessness and irresponsibility.

So these irresponsible thoughts: Watch out for them. Remind yourself that when suffering comes, it's real. After all, it's a noble truth, and it really is painful, it really does hurt. And as for the anguish of the mind that's stuck in a particular situation, you're outside of those situations right now, so don't let yourself slip back in. This is why the Buddha says we should reflect day after day after day on the reflections we chanted just now. We're subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation. These things are real, and the suffering they entail is real. In the original sutta, the Buddha advises reflecting not only on

that, but also on the fact that all living beings are subject to these things. No matter where we go — in the deva realms, the brahma realms, whatever — we're all subject to death. That should give you a strong sense of *samvega* and a desire to be heedful. *Samvega* means a sense of dismay, a sense of urgency in trying to get out of being trapped in a situation. And heedful means watching over your actions very carefully, realizing that your actions do have ramifications.

They've been making a big deal recently about the fact that psychologists are now studying happiness. Well, Buddhism has been studying happiness for 2,600 years. And it focuses on the most important thing that most psychologists tend to ignore, which is that the way you look for happiness is going to have strong ramifications. The actions you do, the things you do and say and think in order to attain happiness: If you're not careful, they can lead to some very unhappy results. They can turn around and devour you. No intention is free from ramifications. In other words, anything you do with a dishonest intention is likely to lead to an experience of suffering. Even though it may yield happiness in the short term, there are long-term ramifications. You can't get away from that fact.

The way most people live nowadays is based on the premise that it doesn't matter what happens down along the road. "That's in the future. I want happiness right now. I want it fast." So people like to be told that the only thing that matters is the present moment, where that's all there is: just the present moment. But your intentions in the present moment act as a cause for things further down the line, on into the future. You want to make sure that those things coming in the future will be good to experience. This sometimes means doing things you don't like to do right now, but you realize that they'll lead to a long-term happiness. Or you may have to stop yourself from doing things you'd like to do right now because they would lead to long-term pain — not just a tangy taste of pain, but the anguish of the actual thing. Your skill in talking yourself into doing what would lead to long-term happiness and into avoiding things that would lead to long-term pain: That's one of the most important skills you can develop, not only in meditation, but in life as a whole.

So remember the difference between the taste and the actual emotion. The taste of the emotion is always pleasant, which is why we enjoy art, why we enjoy works of the imagination, why we enjoy our dreams and fantasies. But the emotion itself often entails pain. So you do your best not to be heedless. Don't fall for the taste.

Levels of Addiction

November 11, 2006

What is attachment? It's basically a kind of addiction, trying to find happiness in things that have never given a true happiness, in things that aren't worth the effort. And we do it again and again and again. Partly, this is from a lack of imagination. We can't imagine other ways of finding happiness. Partly, it's from a lack of skill. We haven't mastered other ways, other approaches for finding happiness. And partly, it's simply a lack of knowledge. We're not paying careful attention to what's going on. So in the practice we try to develop more imagination, more skills, more knowledge.

Let's start with the knowledge. When you find yourself addicted to a particular pleasure and yet you know it has its drawbacks, look to see when the felt need for that pleasure arises. What sort of dis-ease is there in the body, what sort of dis-ease is there in the mind, that incites you with a sudden urge to try to alleviate that sense of dis-ease in the same old way you've tried before? Exactly what are the triggers, what are the feelings? Watch them arise; watch them pass away. You'll begin to realize that the need you have, say, for a particular kind of food or particular kind of pleasure, a particular kind of object, a particular kind of relationship is not permanent. In other words, if you don't give in to that old impulse, the need is not going to stay there. It goes away. If it's a basic hunger, you may need to feed the body, but you don't necessarily have to feed it with something that's going to cause trouble later on.

But so many of our other "needs" last for just a little while. If you have enough endurance to watch them from a different vantage point, you can watch them go away and you're done with them for the time being. A whispering voice in your mind might say that the impulse may be gone for now, but it's going to return, so why don't you just go ahead and give in now. But you don't have to be intimidated by that whispering voice. You can tell it, "We'll deal with its return when it returns. Right now I want to get over this one hurdle." If you get good at watching the need arise and pass away, you develop a greater sense of detachment from it.

The Buddha also says to look for the actual gratification you get out of trying to fill that need in the old way. After all, if there wasn't any gratification at all, you wouldn't go for it. And you won't understand it enough to really let go of it if you keep trying to deny that the gratification is there. At the same time, look for the drawbacks. Learn to compare the two. Is the gratification really worth the price?

If you can't think of any other way of alleviating that need or desire, that's where you need to develop skill and imagination. A lot of the training is aimed at expanding your range of imagination. It's possible to find happiness in life without giving in to your old attachments. The more you see the drawbacks of the attachments, the more willing you'll be to listen to the Dhamma to expand your imagination of what's possible.

The Buddha himself said that as he was practicing, the idea of having to give up his sensual pleasures didn't appeal to him. But then he allowed himself to imagine that a higher type of pleasure was possible. And he realized that to find that higher level of happiness, that more gratifying and more rewarding level of happiness, he'd have to give up his sensual pleasures. So, for the time being, that's what he did. He didn't totally undercut sensual passions at first, but for the time being he told himself to put them aside. That's how he was able to get the mind into states of concentration that provided an even deeper and more gratifying pleasure than sensual passion could provide.

You'll notice this as you work with the breath. There come times when just the process of breathing can feel really gratifying. There's a very strong, intense feeling of pleasure that feels almost sensual. But as the Buddha says, it's not sensual. It has to do with the form of the body, as opposed to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and outside tactile sensations. But it can feel really good in a very visceral way. That's important. Once you see that there's this possibility, it's easier to let go of your other desires as they arise. You've got something better.

There's a passage where the Buddha says that the reason we get so stuck on sensual desires, sensual pleasures, is because we don't see any other alternative to pain. But when you see that there *is* the alternative and, as you reflect on it, you see that it has fewer drawbacks, greater rewards, and that you can learn how to tap into it when you need it, then it can be your new attachment — a much better one. If you want to call it an addiction, it's a healthy addiction, as opposed to the unhealthy ones you've pursued in the past.

So in the beginning it's a matter of learning to imagine yourself accessing the pleasure of concentration, realizing that there is that possibility, and then developing the skill. That way, having developed the skill, your knowledge gets more precise. After a while you begin to see that the level of concentration you've obtained is not as gratifying as you might like. So you can ask yourself: Are there deeper, more gratifying levels of concentration? Well, the Buddha says there are. Again, open your imagination to that idea and see what's there in your present state of concentration that's still a burden, still stressful, still unsatisfactory. Learn to let go of that.

In many cases, this will involve abandoning some of the factors that got you into concentration to begin with — such as directed thought and evaluation — so there may be a resistance to letting them go. Other times there's not. You see clearly that you don't need these things and you simply let them drop. Either way, the process of imagining that you can let them drop will open the way for you to go through more and more refined levels of concentration, deeper, more pervasive levels of pleasure and wellbeing, all the way to a strong state of equanimity. Even the equanimity that comes when you let go of pleasure has a very strong sense of wellbeing. You feel perfectly satisfied. You can stay there with the stillness, and it feels deep down good.

In this way you find that there *are* alternative ways for finding happiness in life, finding pleasure in life. You look back at your old addictions, and they seem not to make much sense any more. From your new perspective, you wonder why you would have felt so addicted to them in the first place. In this way the Buddha doesn't ask you just to go cold turkey, with no gratification, nothing to replace your old addiction. He gives you something new and viscerally pleasing to hold on to.

In so doing, you expand your imagination to other levels as well. You begin to see your old ways of doing things as not so fixed or necessary as you once thought they were. You begin to loosen up your sense of who you are and where you find your happiness, and that alerts you to the fact that you can change even further. You feel more inclined to try out new things in the meditation, even though they seem to go beyond your old ideas of what you thought was possible.

This is why the Buddha talks about nibbana primarily in metaphorical terms: to excite your imagination. He's not totally silent on the topic, and he's not — contrary to what most people say — willing only to discuss it in negative terms. He has some very positive things to say about it, calling it "shelter," "harbor,"

“the beyond.” This is to expand your imagination to encompass the possibility that there’s something even beyond the pleasure, the wellbeing, that comes from getting the mind into good states of concentration. This encourages you to start questioning some of your other addictions, such as your sense of self.

Our sense of self is basically our strategy for happiness. In the course of the practice we learn how to develop new strategies. That means we develop different senses of ourselves as we go through the practice, as we expand our repertoire.

A lot of people feel threatened by the Buddha’s teachings on not-self precisely for this reason. Your sense of self is your strategy for happiness. When you hear the idea of not-self, it sounds as if the Buddha is asking you to abandon everything you know about how to find happiness. No self would leave you with no means for happiness at all. That’s the fear. But what he’s actually doing is teaching you how to refine your strategies for happiness, developing new strategies that are more effective, ultimately coming up with a strategy that’s actually a not-self strategy. It’s not that radically different from what he’s been teaching you on the more elementary levels, because on those levels he’s been teaching you to abandon your unskillful strategies, the addictions that are obviously harmful. But there comes a point in the practice where you have to learn to abandon some of the strategies that were skillful in the beginning but now are beginning to get in the way of something even more refined.

Sometimes you hear people treating your sense of self as an obvious fallacy that causes nothing but harm and stress. If that were the case, it wouldn’t take much to let go of it, seeing how obviously harmful it is. But hey, it’s part of your strategy for happiness. It has its gratifications. You’ve got to admit its good side. Still, there comes a point where you have to look at its drawbacks, its limitations. Even your most skillful strategies for happiness at some point have to get dropped. So the Buddha gives you the positive teachings on nibbana to encourage you to let go of those things, even those skillful strategies, when the time comes.

At the same time, he refuses to say whether there’s going to be a *you* in there, or *no you* in there. He wants you to develop the attitude that, at this stage, your sense of self is irrelevant to whether you’re going to be happy. But he’s not saying that you don’t exist. When asked point blank if there was a self or there was no self, he refused to answer, saying that if you hold to the idea that there is a self you get stuck in eternalism, which blocks the practice: You hold on to certain things as being the eternal you and you’ll never be able to let them go. If you

develop the idea that there is no self, that's annihilationism, which blocks the practice as well: Either you fear being annihilated or you have a neurotic desire to want to be annihilated, neither of which is helpful.

So there comes a point where you have to put issues of self and not-self aside, and just look at where there's stress, and what activities are causing the stress, and how to stop them. That's why the teachings on the four noble truths trump every other teaching. It's how the teachings on developing a skillful self are strategies, and the teachings on not-self are strategies as well. The teachings on nibbana are strategies, too. Nibbana won't get you to nibbana, but the desire to get there will. So learn to use these strategies to overcome your most blatant and harmful addictions, and then your more subtle ones, until you finally reach what the Buddha called the ultimate happiness — *nibbanam paramam sukham* — where you can put all your addictions, all your strategies, aside.

Antidotes for Clinging

October 7, 2007

There are some places in the Pali Canon where the Buddha says that the five aggregates are stressful, and others where he says the five *clinging*-aggregates are stressful. It's important to notice here that he's talking about two different kinds of stress. The sense in which the five aggregates are stressful is related to stress in terms of the three characteristics. They're inconstant and so they're stressful. That's simply the way they are, whether you hold on to them or not. But if you don't grab on to these things, your mind doesn't suffer. It's when you grab on, it's when you cling, that stress comes into the mind. You create a clinging-aggregate. You create a connection. This is stress in terms of the four noble truths. Wherever there's craving, there can be clinging, and the clinging to the aggregates is the stress that really weighs on the mind.

When we practice, our main focus is on the stress in the four noble truths, the stress that weighs on the mind. If you don't cling to the things that are stressful, then they can be as stressful as they want, but the stress doesn't come in and weigh you down. It's like picking up a heavy object. If you just leave it there on the ground, it doesn't weigh you down. It weighs the same whether you're picking it up or not. When you pick it up it's fifty pounds; when you leave it on the ground it's fifty pounds. The difference is that the fifty pounds is suddenly on top of you when you pick it up, and that's when you suffer. That's precisely the stress the Buddha is focusing on. That's the important one to notice.

Always try to be clear about this distinction. The real problem isn't the aggregates, it's the clinging. And the word *clinging* has a double meaning. It can also mean the act of feeding on something. Where we cling is where we look to feed for happiness. We look to the five aggregates for food. We munch them down, and then they munch *us* down. We feed on the form of the body, we feed on feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, and sensory consciousness. When these things are pleasant, they're not too heavy. But they can turn around and turn unpleasant very quickly. They gobble us up, for we've opened the way for

them to get to us. Once you start clinging to the good ones, you start clinging to the bad ones as well, because that's where you're looking for food.

So it's important to understand clinging so that you can put an end to it. As the Buddha said, there are four kinds. There's sensual clinging, clinging to views, clinging to habits and practices, and then clinging to doctrines of the self. All of these hover around the five aggregates. They're different ways of clinging to the five aggregates. And the Buddha has a different cure for each.

Sometimes you hear that the deepest, most underlying form of clinging is the sense of self identity that you build around things. If you learn how not to have any sense of self identity, there you are: You've taken care of all the other forms of clinging. Sometimes you hear that clinging to views is the basic form of clinging. If you can deconstruct all your views, you'll be done with all the other forms of clinging as well. So you reason your way to seeing how you can't say that things exist, you can't say that things don't exist, or both, or neither. They're empty. That means that your sensual desire is empty, your habits and practices are empty, your doctrines of the self are empty. With everything empty like that, there's nothing to cling to. But that doesn't work either. After letting things go in this way, you'll find that your sensual desires weren't touched. You just turn around and pick them back up. So you have to realize that each kind of clinging has its own antidote.

For example, clinging to sensuality: When the Buddha talks about sensuality, he doesn't say that you're attached to sights or sounds. The word *kama*, or sensuality, here doesn't mean beautiful or desirable sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations. It means the plans and intentions you have around these things. *That's* what we're really focused on. We're all attached to the ideas we have of the things we want, wanting them to be a certain way to give us pleasure. In other words, we're more attached to our dreams and plans about sensual pleasures than we are to the sensual pleasures themselves. This is simple enough to see. If you find your sensual desire thwarted in one area, you turn around and you focus it on something else. The desire is what we cling to. We cling to the plans that we make for sensual pleasure.

And what are these plans like? For the most part, they're pretty one-sided and sketchy. Say you have designs on somebody else's body. When you think about that person's body, there are only certain details that you think about. A lot of details you don't want to think about at all. Or when you think about a

particular relationship, you think about only certain aspects of the relationship and not about others.

So the antidote here is to broaden your view, to see that your pursuit of pleasure in this way carries a lot of pain along with it. When the Buddha talks about the drawbacks of sensuality, he starts with the fact that in order to lead a sensual lifestyle, you've got to work. The work in and of itself is painful and wearisome. You work and work and work to build up wealth. Sometimes you gain it; sometimes you don't. Even when you do gain it, there's the fear that, as he says, thieves and kings will steal it — I like the way the Buddha always mentions kings and thieves in the same breath — water might wash it away, fire might burn it, hateful heirs could take off with it. That can easily happen to your wealth. And as the Buddha points out, it's over sensuality that people fight. Parents fight with their children; children fight with their parents; brothers with sisters, sisters with brothers; husband with wife, wife with husband. And not just in the family: There are wars over sensual pleasures as well because we need to take wealth to pay for our passions, which are far greater than all the wealth in the world. That's how we end up going to war.

The Buddha goes down a long list of all the pains and sufferings tied up with this pursuit of our dreams of sensuality. So as you look at the pursuit of sensuality in its entirety, you realize how much pain and suffering it involves. You don't have to look too far. This contemplation we have of the requisites every day, thinking about food, clothing, shelter, and medicine: Just the fact that we have a body makes us a burden on other people. So think about that. Every time your mind starts spinning a web of sensual desire, tell yourself: "If you're going to spin a web, spin the full web. Try to encompass the whole picture."

Like that daydream that Ajaan Lee reports in his autobiography, from the time he was planning to disrobe: At first it starts out really nice; he even gets a nobleman's daughter for his wife. But then the reality principle starts kicking in. Eventually, because she's a nobleman's daughter, she's not up to the hard work that's required in marrying a peasant's son. She dies and leaves him with a child to raise. He gets a second wife. The second wife has a kid of her own and starts playing favorites, abusing the first kid. And so on down the line. When we bring in reality like this, it helps cut through a lot of our delusions around sensuality, a lot of our attachment to sensual designs, sensual plans, sensual dreams.

Or you can contemplate the body, in all its parts. You can think of a beautiful body, but when you think of the parts inside, you say *wuuuh*. Just a few

micrometers below the skin there's all this other stuff, and it's inextricably connected with the things you like. Suppose you lust for somebody. You don't like the idea of their intestines, but if you took their intestines out, would you like that person without any intestines? It's not worth taking either way — with or without a liver, with or without a stomach.

So when you think in these ways, you begin to realize that your sensual plans and desires are really unrealistic, really misleading. They make you half blind so that they can take you down a path to suffering. Realizing this helps cut through the sensuality. You see how arbitrary all these dreams are, that you can't rely on them. That's what helps you let them go.

As for clinging to views, the Buddha has you follow a similar process, but with different details. The process is that he has you look at the drawbacks that come from clinging to a view, one of the major drawbacks being that you inevitably get into arguments with other people. But more than that, the Buddha has you look carefully at the things you have views about. This is where the details differ, and the analysis goes into more technical terms. Your views come down to the question of what exists and what doesn't exist, he says, but when you actually look at your sensory experience, you just see things arising and passing away. As you focus on the arising, the idea of non-existence doesn't occur to you. As you focus on the passing away, the idea of existence doesn't occur to you. You realize that the basic building blocks of experience, when you look at them just on the level of arising and passing away, don't provide a foundation for the very basic polarities of existing and not-existing. On top of that, any views you build are sketches based on not looking at things very carefully. So the Buddha has you look very carefully at the process of what it's like to experience things. When you see that views really can't express the truth about things, and that holding onto them is going to cause you to suffer, you can cut through your attachment to them.

As for habits and practices, he first has you look at the actual habits or precepts and practices you're attached to. The attachment here is to the idea that if you follow certain rules and you're a good little boy, a good little girl, that's all you have to do. God will be happy with you or the universe will approve of you or whatever. So the Buddha has people look directly at their habits and practices together with their results, some of which are actively harmful. Back in his days, sacrifices were believed to be a way to find true happiness. So he talked about looking at the misery that comes through the sacrifices, not only for the animals

sacrificed but also for the people forced to labor in getting the animals killed. Self-torture as a form of austerity was also a popular practice in some circles. So he had you look at the pain that comes from it, to see that it doesn't really lead anywhere. It doesn't really help cleanse the mind.

So in this way he'd get people to abandon harmful habits and practices, and replace them with good habits and good practices: the habits we adopt as part of our virtue, the practices we follow in the practice of meditation. But eventually he says to watch out: If you're not careful, you're going to create a sense of conceit around these things, the pride that comes sometimes when "I follow the precepts and you don't," or "My jhana's better than yours." The way to get beyond that attachment is not to break the precepts or drop your practice of jhana. It's simply to continue with those practices while learning how not to develop a sense of conceit around them. Realize that you're doing these things not to make yourself better than other people, but simply because they work in cleansing the mind.

Finally there's clinging to doctrines of self. This doesn't mean just the view that "I have a self," whatever your sense of self might be. It also means clinging to the view that "I have no self." Thinking in either way, the Buddha said, leads you into a thicket of views that will get you entangled. So, as with the cure for clinging to views, the Buddha has you take the polarity of existence or nonexistence and put it aside. When the issue of existing or not-existing is a non-issue, the idea of a self existing or not existing is a non-issue as well. Instead, the Buddha has you look at things simply in terms of the four noble truths. Where is stress arising? What is the cause of that stress? What's the path to the end of that stress? As you divide up your experience in those terms, the whole issue of "who you are" or "who you're not" just gets put aside. You're more focused on what you're doing that's causing stress, learning how to comprehend the stress, learning how to abandon the cause through developing the path, so that ultimately you can realize the end of stress, the end of suffering. That's the way out of that type of clinging.

So when you find the mind clinging, weighing itself down with its attachment to the aggregates, try to be clear about exactly which kind of clinging you're suffering from and what the antidote is, what the medicine that the Buddha prescribed, because it's different in each case. There's no one blanket cure to cover every form of clinging. You've got to develop your discernment from many angles, develop discernment with many facets. Essentially every approach

involves seeing things in terms of being inconstant, stressful, and not-self, but those principles get applied in different ways for each type of clinging.

So try to keep this list of medicines in mind and apply them as appropriate. That way you put yourself in a position where you're living in a world that's stressful but you're not pulling the stress inside. You can live surrounded by inconstancy, stress, and not-self, but not suffer from it.

Fear of Death

October 11, 2005

The Buddha's decision to go off into the forest started with his realization that he was subject to aging, illness, and death, and yet these were the things in which he had been searching for happiness. We, too, are subject to aging, illness, and death, and we tend to search for our happiness in things that age, grow ill, and die as well. He, however, wanted a happiness that was better than that, something that was more reliable. This desire was what underlay all of his efforts: to find a happiness that would not age, would not grow ill, and would not die. Of course, all of his friends and his family told him that that was impossible. But he decided that life would not be worth living unless he gave it a try. So he worked hard for six years, going down some dead-end paths, finding himself in blind alleys, but finally he found the path that led to a happiness that did not grow ill, did not age, and did not die. That's what he taught for the rest of his life. That path — the noble eightfold path — was his first teaching, and it was one of his last teachings as well.

Prominent in the path is right effort, the kind of effort that leads to the type of happiness that he had been looking for. It starts with desire: generating desire, upholding your intent to let go of unskillful qualities that have arisen, to prevent unskillful qualities that have not arisen from arising, to give rise to skillful qualities, and to maintain them and bring them to their culminations. Desire is what animates those activities.

Notice that these efforts are internal activities. These qualities are qualities of the mind. They will manifest themselves outside — in your thoughts, words, and deeds — but they come from within, so that's where the main effort is focused. This is why the section of the noble eightfold path that deals with concentration starts with right effort: the effort to give rise to skillful qualities, like mindfulness, alertness, discernment. These are the things that are really going to help you. Even if you don't make it all the way to nibbana, these qualities will stand by you as the body ages, as it grows ill, as it dies. One of the discoveries the Buddha

made on the night of his Awakening was that things don't end with death. There is a carryover. But it's not the body that carries over. It's qualities of the mind.

He called these qualities noble treasures — things like conviction in the principle of action, the belief that all of your intentional actions will bear fruit in line with the quality of the intention; virtue; a sense of shame at the idea of doing evil things; a sense of compunction or fear of the consequences of doing evil things; a desire for learning; the ability to relinquish what gets in the way of your path; and discernment. These seven qualities are called noble treasures because, as the Buddha said, fire can't burn them, thieves and kings can't steal them, death can't kill them, water can't wash them away.

So death is not the end. Some things carry over, but you have to focus your energies on the mind if you want to have good things to carry over. Otherwise the things you carry over are bad.

This is why our effort here is aimed in two directions. One, if you can gain total release, this is the path to total release. Two, if you don't gain total release within this lifetime, you've got things to carry over as you continue your quest in your next lifetime. But you have to desire those qualities. Otherwise it's hard to gain them, for they do require work. We may be attracted to the idea of a path that doesn't require any action or effort at all, but it doesn't work that way. The path of inaction just goes in the general way that water goes — downhill — developing bad qualities to carry over, whereas the path that goes uphill requires effort.

Right effort doesn't require that you kill yourself or exhaust yourself, but it does require an *appropriate* effort, whatever is required to get past unskillful qualities and give rise to skillful ones. There are times when it requires a lot of concerted effort. Other times, it requires just the ability to sit and watch. But it's always a focused effort, an appropriate effort, whatever the situation demands.

It's built on the desire to find something that goes beyond aging, illness, and death, something you can really rely on. To help generate that desire, the Buddha has us look long and hard at aging, illness, and death — and at our fear of these things. He says that our fear of death is based on four things. Either we're attached to the body, we're attached to sensual pleasures, we realize that we've done cruel and harmful things to other people, or we haven't yet seen the true Dhamma, that there really is a deathless. A lot of our meditation is aimed at overcoming those four reasons for fear.

For example, the realization that we've done cruel things in the past: The Buddha doesn't have us get tied up in remorse. The principle of kamma, which sometimes sounds deterministic, is actually a very fluid and complex process, one with room for making changes in the present moment. One of the things you *can* do to counteract the harmful effects from unskillful things you've done in the past is to develop an attitude of goodwill for all beings without limit. The Buddha calls it an expansive mind state. When painful things happen in an expansive mind state, the impact is much different from things happening in a narrow and confined mind state. The image he gives is of a lump of salt placed in water. If you put the lump of salt in a glass of water, the water becomes unfit to drink. If you put it in a broad, clean river, the water in the river is still fit to drink because there's so much more water compared to the salt. So the Buddha recommends that you develop an attitude of goodwill for all beings, both because it counteracts the effects of bad actions in the past, and because it prevents you from acting on unskillful intentions now and into the future. If you really feel goodwill for all, there's no way you can intentionally harm them. You don't have to like all beings; you simply decide that you don't want to cause them suffering. You don't want to take pleasure in their suffering.

As you think about it, what good do you get out of other people's suffering? You don't gain anything at all. There may be a sense of *schadenfreude*, but that's pretty miserable food for the mind. It's better to realize that if all the cruel and heartless people in the world had a true sense of happiness, they wouldn't do cruel and heartless things anymore. So the desire for goodwill sets your attitude straight on how the world would actually become a better place for everyone: You're wishing that people would understand how to be truly happy, so that they'd stop doing cruel and heartless things. Goodwill also puts you in a position where your true happiness doesn't have to conflict with the true happiness of other people. So this is one way of counteracting that particular reason for fear.

As for attachment to the body and to sensual pleasures, the Buddha has a double-pronged attack. One prong is to see the drawbacks of being attached to these things. If you're attached to the body, where is it going to take you? It's going to take you to aging, illness, and death, for sure, no matter how much you exercise or beautify the body. It may take you to other places in the meantime, but the ultimate end is something we all share, and we all know for sure that it's going to happen.

The same holds true for sensual pleasures. Where are the sensual pleasures you were enjoying last week? Right now all you have is a memory of them. Sometimes that memory is tainted by the realization that you did unskillful things in order to gain those pleasures or to keep them. Not only do they tend to slip away on their own, there are also times when other people want what you've got and they're going to fight you for it. So you have to fight them off. The Buddha illustrates this point with the image of a hawk that has found a little lump of meat. As soon as it tries to carry it off, other birds are going to come and attack it. Then there's the image of a man sitting up in a fruit tree, enjoying the fruit in the tree, but another man comes along with a hatchet. Instead of climbing the tree to get the fruit, he uses the hatchet to cut the tree down. If the man in the tree doesn't come down right away, he's going to get hurt. That's what looking for happiness in sensual pleasures does to you. It leaves you exposed on all sides to danger.

This is why the Buddha recommends right concentration as the second prong in his attack, to provide you with an alternative source for happiness so that you're not so hungry for sensual pleasures. You can sit here and bathe the body in a sense of ease, in a sense of rapture, simply by focusing on the breath, adjusting the breath so that it's comfortable, and no one is going to try to steal it from you. Once it really feels good, you can just settle in, letting the breath bathe you on all sides, coming in and out all of the pores of the skin, allowing that sense of ease and rapture to suffuse the whole body. As you get really adept at this, your attachment to sensual pleasures begins to loosen, for you see that this is a much better pleasure. It's more intense, more pervasive, more reliable, less blameworthy, and a lot less dangerous. So right concentration, in a very direct way, is one of the ways of overcoming fear of death, because you realize that you have an alternative source of pleasure.

But the ultimate step in overcoming fear of death lies in seeing the true Dhamma. This means realizing that there is something deathless that can be touched by the mind right where you've been experiencing the body. It comes not just through concentration, but also through working on the opportunities for insight that the concentration provides. As the mind gets more and more still, you begin to see the mind's attachments. You can see them as activities. Even its sense of itself, or your sense of yourself, is just a series of strategies you've devised.

The Buddha calls these strategies the process of “I-making” and “my-making.” Whatever way you form a sense of self around form, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, or consciousness, it’s all just fabrication. In the process of fabrication there’s stress. If that’s all there were in life, you’d be willing to put up with the stress, for without your self-strategies there would be no way to find happiness. But the Buddha says that there’s more. If you can learn how to deconstruct all those fabrications, all the stories and ideas, the things you build around your sense of who you are and who other people are and what the world is: If you can learn to deconstruct those things, you find a greater happiness, one that doesn’t die.

That’s what right mindfulness and right concentration are for: to provide you with a framework in which you can do the deconstruction. The deconstruction is the four noble truths, just looking at things in terms of stress, the cause of stress, what you’re doing to put an end to that cause. And the actual end of stress comes as you get more and more precise, more and more skillful at following the path. Your precision and skill lead you to detect even more and more subtle levels of fabrication going on in the mind. When you see the stress that comes with even the subtlest fabrication, and see that you also have the choice not to fabricate — that whatever gratification you got from the fabrication just can’t compare with the sense of ease that comes from dropping that particular level of fabrication — the mind will be willing to let go, willing to stop. In this way it peels these levels of fabrication away in the same way as you’d peel away the layers of an onion.

When all intention finally ends, that’s when you realize that there is something deathless. The Buddha was right. There is something that can be touched in the mind that doesn’t require fabrication — in fact it’s totally unfabricated. It has nothing to do with time or space or anything that can age, grow ill, or die at all. It’s just there. It can’t be touched by the vagaries of time, but it *can* be touched by undoing the patterns of intention and fabrication in the mind.

Once you’ve touched that, you realize that there is something that doesn’t die. It has nothing to do with you, although it was through your activities and intentions — skillful intentions that took apart your other intentions — that you got to the point where you could realize this. Because there’s no need to strategize in there, there’s no self that comes with the felt need to strategize, or the felt need to partake of the happiness. The happiness is just there. You don’t need a “you” to create it or to partake of it. Once you’ve seen that, that’s what

really gets you beyond fear of death, for the part that doesn't die is much more worthwhile than the things that do.

Right now these are all just ideas, possibilities, for people who are still struggling to get on the path. But it's important to have a sense of what's possible, because that expands your imagination. As your imagination gets expanded, your desires change as well. If you think the deathless is impossible, your desires are going to focus on things that can die. But if you open up to the possibility that there is a deathless that can be attained through human effort, it's a challenge. Hopefully, it stirs some desire to follow the path, to test if what the Buddha said is really true.

So keep this possibility in mind, because this is what gives energy to the desire to stick with right effort, to stick with the path, so that the deathless is not just an idea or news of somebody else's claims. Ultimately it becomes an actual experience based on your actual efforts. It's not just news about what somebody else did in the past. It's your news. Of course, nobody else has to know. As the chant says, it's *paccattam*, something that each person can experience only for him or herself. But when it becomes a reality in your mind, it makes a huge change. Aging, illness, and death don't hold any fear. As one of the texts says, you attain something that allows you to live in peace, ease, and bliss, even when you're old, even when you're sick, even when you die. And that's a possibility really worth exploring.

The Raft of Concepts

August 3, 2007

When you start out meditating, you have to think — but in a skillful way. In other words, directed thought and evaluation are factors of right concentration on the level of first jhana. Even if you can get into concentration really quickly, it requires some thinking to get you there. And if you get into concentration slowly, you've got to learn how to think your way into the concentration. So think about the breath; visualize the breath in the body. Think about how to make the breath more comfortable. Once it's comfortable, think about how to spread it around in different parts of your body. Think about the way you understand the breath. There are various levels to the breath, you know. There's the in-and-out breath. There's the breath energy flowing along your blood vessels, flowing along your nerves. There's a still breath in the body. There are lots of breaths you can think about. And these thoughts, if you use them properly, are all meant to help the mind get settled down.

The Buddha once said that after all his years of false starts and dead-end alleys, he finally got onto the path when he realized that he should divide his thoughts into two types: skillful and unskillful. This meant that he judged his thoughts by the results they gave. He didn't say that all thinking was bad. He did say that if you thought skillful thoughts for 24 hours, the drawback would be that the body and mind would get tired, so you want the mind to learn how to rest from the thinking. But he never said that the conceptual mind is bad. It's simply a matter of learning how to use your concepts properly. That's the path. It's part of right view and right resolve. These factors of the path involve thoughts.

So we can't condemn thoughts entirely. We just need to learn how to think in new ways, in ways that are actually skillful, that help free the mind. Ultimately you do get to a place that's beyond concepts, that goes beyond words, but you need concepts and words to help get you there.

This is a point that a lot of people misunderstand. They think that in order to get beyond concepts, you just drop concepts immediately. It's like the old simile of the raft. The version in the Buddha's teachings is that you take the raft across

the river. Then, once you get across the river, you don't need the raft anymore. You can put it aside. Thoughts of right view and thoughts of right resolve are part of the raft. You hold onto them while you're crossing the river, and only then do you put them aside. However, in the Diamond Sutra's version of the simile, you get across the river by dropping the raft to begin with. But that version of the simile just doesn't work. If you drop the raft before you've reached the other shore, you get washed away. So learn how to use the raft.

This issue goes way back to the time of the Buddha. There's a story in the Canon about Anathapindika, who was out walking in the morning. He said to himself, "It's too early to go visit the monks; why don't I go visit the members of other sects?" So he went to a place where the other sectarians were having their debates. They were debating whether the world is eternal or not; whether it's finite or infinite; whether the soul is the same thing as the body or something different from the body; whether an enlightened being exists after death, or doesn't exist, or both, or neither. Those were the hot issues of the day.

The sectarians saw Anathapindika coming and said, "Hey, let's be quiet for a while. This person is a follower of the Buddha. The Buddha's followers like quiet people. Maybe if we're quiet, he'll come over and talk to us." So they fell quiet. When Anathapindika came, they asked him: "So. This Buddha you're a student of: What are his views?" And Anathapindika said, "I really don't know the total extent of his views." "What about the monks? What are their views?" And he responded, "I don't know totally what their views are, either." "Then what about you?" they asked him. "What are your views?" And he responded, "Well, I'll be happy to tell you my views, but I'd like to hear your views first."

So they told him their views. One man said, "The world is eternal. Only this is true; everything else is false and worthless." Someone else said, "No, the world is not eternal. Only this is true; everything else is false and worthless." And so on down the line.

Anathapindika's response was: "Those who hold to any of these views suffer because they're clinging to the view. The view is conditioned, and whenever there's clinging to anything conditioned, there's bound to be suffering. So they're clinging to stress." The sectarians then said, "Well, what about your view?" And he said, essentially, "All views are conditioned. Whatever is conditioned, you have to let go of." They said, "Well, then, by your logic, your view too is a cause for suffering, for you're clinging to something conditioned." And he said, "No,

this is the view that leads beyond suffering, because it teaches you ultimately how to let go of everything conditioned, including views.”

According to the story, this left them abashed. They just sat there with their heads drooping, at a loss for words. So he got up and left. When he told the Buddha what had happened, the Buddha said, “This is a good way to deal with those people.”

So this is the Buddha’s approach. Not all views are a cause of suffering. Right view leads you away from suffering because it allows you to do two things. First, you can use it as a tool to uproot your clinging to everything else. Then, because it teaches you to recognize all your attachments wherever they are, it teaches you how to turn around and let go of right view itself.

People often come to the Dhamma thinking that we’re here to get beyond concepts. But they run into concepts in the Buddha’s teachings, and therefore they feel that the Buddha’s being inconsistent. What’s inconsistent, though, is their misunderstanding. The Buddha never says that we have to drop concepts from the very beginning. He says you use concepts to get beyond concepts.

Many people in the modern world come to Buddhism suffering from their conceptual framework. They’re raised in a materialist worldview whose basic concepts — that life comes from nothing and returns to nothing, with a brief chance to pursue pleasure in the interim — are pretty dismal. They believe that if they could free their minds from these concepts and simply dwell in the present with no thought of what happens at the end, they’d be happy. They’d be able to squeeze as much pleasure out of the present as they could before the inevitable hits.

So they look for a way to be free of all concepts. When they come here, though, they run into concepts. They see the Buddha’s teachings on kamma and rebirth, and they say, “This is invalid; you can’t make presuppositions about these things. Nobody knows anything about what happens before we’re born. Nobody knows anything about what happens after we die. Doesn’t the Buddha say that you have to prove things before you can accept them? All we know is that you can blot these issues out of the mind and be in the present moment without any concepts, and that’s happiness.” So that’s what they want the Buddha’s teachings to be. They don’t realize that they’re judging the Buddha’s teachings by the very concepts that are making them miserable. The idea that we can’t know beyond our immediate sensory experience, so therefore we just try to heighten our immediate sensory experience: That’s a concept itself, and although

it may aim at going beyond concepts, it doesn't really get you there. The Buddha's concepts, though, actually give results. They're very open about the fact that you have to use concepts to get beyond concepts, and their idea of what's there when the path has freed you from concepts is more than just a pleasant oblivion in the present. It's another dimension entirely.

That's what right view is all about. It's there for you to judge the concepts you're bringing to the path, to see which ones fit into the strategy of the path to that dimension — nibbana — and which ones don't. The Buddha never says that he can offer an empirical proof of the teachings on kamma, rebirth, or nibbana. But he says that if you do adopt these ideas, they're very helpful in taking you beyond suffering. In other words, he offers a pragmatic proof: He has you look at these concepts in terms of what they do, where they lead. If you find that they lead you to wanting to train the mind so you can get rid of the craving that leads on to future rebirth, they've performed their function.

Then as you sit down here to meditate, you can put the concepts that are not immediately relevant to your meditation aside. If you find that you're having trouble sticking with the meditation, you can call up those concepts again to remind yourself of why you're here, to induce a feeling of *samvega*, a dismay over the pointlessness of life as it's normally lived; and a feeling of *pasada*, or confidence that if there's any way out, this has got to be it: training the mind, learning how to watch the mind so you can see where its misunderstandings lead it to suffer, where its misunderstandings lead it to crave things that are going to cause problems on down the line. And as for the teaching on nibbana, it reminds you that freedom from suffering isn't just a total blackout. It's the highest happiness there is.

In this way, you can use the Buddha's insights on these topics to give more impetus to practice. After all, we're doing something important here. We're not just trying to hang out in the present moment and squeeze as much intensity out of it as we can. The Buddha says that our intentions, if they're unskillful, stand in the way of the ultimate happiness. So we're here to watch our intentions. This is where the teaching of kamma is always and immediately relevant to your meditation, and why the Buddha stresses the issue of kamma over and over again.

The early Buddhists often made the point that their teachings on kamma were what set them apart from all the other teachings available at the time. For instance, the Buddhist take on kamma isn't the deterministic view that some

people held to at that time. And it's not a view of total chaos, either. It's a nonlinear pattern. And the important element in that non-linear pattern is that part of your experience is shaped by past intentions and part of it's shaped by your present intentions. You can't do anything about past intentions, but you *can* change your present ones. So you focus there. That's why we're focused on the present moment: to look at our intentions. When you have right view, you realize that that's why we're here.

This helps give focus to your meditation. Once the mind is still, you intend to *keep* it still. That's a skillful intention. Then you can start looking at the process of intention in a deeper way, to see exactly how intention happens, how much it shapes your present experience, how you fabricate your breath, how you fabricate thoughts, how you fabricate feelings and perceptions. You want to look into that. That's how discernment is developed. You're not going to maintain this kind of focus unless you have a real appreciation that, yes, your actions really are important in this issue of creating suffering — not only now but on into the future. This is how the proper use of concepts gives focus to your meditation.

A while back, I was giving a talk to a group of people on kamma. They'd been meditating for quite a while, so I tried to make the point that an understanding of kamma really focuses your meditation in an important way. It helps focus you on the issue of what you're doing that's skillful and what you're doing that's not skillful, and realizing how much your "doing" does shape your experience.

They all gave me a blank look. Then I realized that they'd been taught that there is no such thing as skillful or unskillful, good or bad in the meditation. It's simply a question of hanging out in the present moment, squeezing as much non-conceptual intensity out of the present moment as you can — which is an idea the Buddha never advocated. That's not what we're here for. I mean, there *will* be times when you notice that being very mindful in the present makes experiences more intense. You're less caught up in your thought worlds, and the pleasure in the breath grows stronger. Everything becomes more immediately felt. But that's not why we're here. You want to look deeper: What is it about intention that makes the difference in the present moment? Always look for that, because that's where freedom is going to be found — in being sensitive to your intentions. When you're totally sensitive to them and totally understand how they cause stress, you can let them go. This is what the Buddha calls the kamma that leads to the end of kamma.

This is why an understanding of causality is so essential. If everything were deterministic, your experience would have been totally decided by some outside being or some impersonal fate a long time ago. There would be no point in practicing. There would be nothing the practice could accomplish. If, on the other hand, everything were chaotic, you couldn't be sure that the lessons you learned yesterday would give any guidance in knowing what to do skillfully today. But the fact that things are nonlinear and not totally determined by the past — that part of your experience is being determined by what you're choosing to focus on, what you're choosing to do and say and think right now: That leaves an opening for the practice, because you can change what you intend right now. And the fact that things follow a pattern allows your knowledge of what's skillful to grow over time. When you believe that, you act on it. You try to make your intentions more and more skillful.

So when we come to the practice, we learn to adopt new concepts that have a good impact on the mind. That's the test — a pragmatic test. In the beginning, you begin to see that this belief does help here, it does help there, so you pursue it more and more persistently. Then ultimately you discover that it's a big help in putting an end to suffering. That's your real proof that the concepts work — and only then do you get beyond concepts.

Even when you're in concentration, once you drop directed thought and evaluation, you still have perceptions. In fact all the states of concentration up to the dimension of nothingness are based on a perception — the label you hold in mind that keeps you in that state of stillness. Even though there's no discursive thought, there's still a concept there.

So the practice is a matter of learning how to use your concepts wisely, picking and choosing which ones are helpful and which ones are not. Knowing when you need to think discursively, when you can drop discursive thought and just be with one perception: That's a skill based on right view.

If you learn how to make your views right and then apply those right views to understanding how the mind creates suffering, that's how views ultimately take you beyond views. Your right view will show you how to let go of right view when you need to. But don't be too quick to drop it. Don't be the sort of person who leaves the raft on the near shore and tries to float through the air over the river. Use the raft when it's helpful. That's why the Buddha left it behind for us. That's what it's for.

Kamma & Rebirth

February 29, 2008

We're born into this world without an instruction booklet. There's nothing to explain which issues in life are important, which are the important things to know. We do know when we feel suffering and we know when we feel relative ease, but that's about as much as we know. As we grow up, there are people to explain things to us. This is where human beings have an advantage over animals. There's nobody to explain anything to a dog or a cat about how to live. There's that wonderful story by Mark Twain where the mother dog explains the human world to her puppy. Of course that's fantasy. What's interesting about that story is the mother has her information all garbled up. "Presbyterian" is the name of a dog breed; "heroism" means "agriculture" — that sort of thing. Actually, getting garbled information can be one of the dangers of the human world, too. Our parents have taught us things from childhood and they may have gotten things all mixed up as well.

So there are a lot of things we don't know, and we have to make a lot of decisions based on uncertain information. What are the important issues in life? And what is this life, anyhow? Is it part of a longer story or is it just this story, the whole story right here, right now: birth, aging, death? And how about our actions? We seem to decide what to do. We seem to make choices, those choices seem to have results, and there seems to be some sort of pattern to the results. Some actions seem to lead to good results, other actions to bad results. But are things as they seem? We don't really know.

So we find ourselves acting on assumptions as to what leads to happiness and what leads to pain, those two things that we do know when we experience them. But the question is, is the quest for happiness really worthwhile or should we be looking for something else? There's really no hard proof for any of these issues, so we act on assumptions.

When you come to meditate you're already acting on certain assumptions. One is that the training of the mind is worthwhile. That means you believe that your actions are important and that knowledge and training will make a

difference in how you act. Those are big assumptions right there, but when you look at your life, you've seen that acting on those assumptions has brought you at least some happiness.

That's called a pragmatic proof. It's not an empirical proof. An empirical proof would be able to trace the energy that goes from our decision to act to the actual action, and from the action to the results that we experience. You'd have to run experiments with controls and actually be able to measure happiness in a very precise way. But you can't do that. All those tests that they say they've run about measuring the happiness in different countries or measuring the happiness of people in different social groups, with different levels of income: When you ask people to rate their happiness on a scale from 1 to 10, what kind of science is that? What's your 8 compared to somebody else's 8 on a scale of 1 to 10?

So there's really no empirical proof for any of these things. But there is a personal pragmatic proof. You find that when you act on certain assumptions, things seem to turn out in a particular way, and some assumptions lead to better results than others. That's the kind of proof that the Buddha has you act on. He teaches about the principle of action, that action is real, and that your intention is what determines the result of the action. There were people in the Buddha's time who said that action was unreal, that it only seemed to exist. But the Buddha said to look at how those people lived. Did they live as if action didn't exist? They chose different courses of action and preferred some to others. This shows that on a pragmatic level they still believed that action was important and that some actions were preferable to others, some were more skillful than others. They really would have an impact on your happiness.

There were also people who said that your actions didn't really lead to happiness or pain. Happiness and pain were self-caused and very arbitrary. And yet those people had a theory all worked out as to why this was so, and why it was important to believe this, and how to live in response to that belief. In other words, they still believed that knowledge was important, actions were important, and one way of action was preferable to another.

This is how the Buddha recommended that you look at the issue of action. What series of beliefs about action lead you to act in a skillful way and give good results? There's a sense of greater or lesser happiness that you can know only for yourself. You can't compare your happiness with somebody else's. But you can look inside.

So the Buddha never tried to offer an empirical proof for his teaching on kamma or the teaching on rebirth. The people who claim that science has proven either of these, or that they have proven these principles to themselves in an empirical way, are not doing the Buddha's teachings any favor. You can't really prove these things empirically, and people who really understand empirical proofs will look down on Buddhism for making that sort of claim. The Buddha himself didn't try to give an empirical proof. He did say, though, that if you act in certain ways you will find a greater sense of ease, a greater sense of wellbeing in life. And these actions will depend on certain assumptions.

For instance, the question of rebirth: If you believe that this life is all we've got and the end of life is uncertain, would you be sitting here meditating? Maybe, maybe not. It's all pretty arbitrary. Would you be kind to other people? Maybe, maybe not. But if you did go on the assumption that this is part of a longer story shaped by your actions, and that your actions are shaped by your mind, you'd be sure to put more effort into training the mind to be meticulous and careful. You'd take whatever time and effort is needed to get the mind in good shape.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha recommended that we take his teachings on kamma and rebirth as a working hypothesis. He said that he learned in the course of his Awakening that this life is actually part of a longer story of many lifetimes that have been going on for a very long time and could potentially continue going on for a very long time to come. In other words, the principle of rebirth is true. And it's also true that one of the reasons for training the mind is ultimately to be able to put an end to that story, because there's a greater happiness that comes when there's no more rebirth. But he also stated that even if this were not the case, you'd live a happier, better life by assuming that it is.

So when you wonder about the Buddha's teachings on these topics, remember that we're all acting on assumptions. The problem for many of us is that our assumptions are not articulated or we haven't worked out the consequences of the assumptions we have articulated. This means that when we encounter a fully articulated assumption, it may seem strange. We have to reflect back on ourselves: What are our assumptions about action, about life, about happiness, about how the principle of causality works in our lives? And then which assumptions really lead to the greatest happiness if we act on them, if we keep our actions consistent with what we believe?

That's the role of faith in the Buddhist teachings. For many of us in the West, faith has gotten a bad name. We've had it pushed on us as a virtue from some

circles: The less a particular proposition or idea makes sense, then the more faith you have in it, the better — which is a real insult to the human mind. It's an insult to be told that we have to take irrational and inconsistent doctrines on faith and that we have to believe them more strongly than we believe the evidence appearing right before our eyes or in our very own hearts.

Fortunately that's not how the Buddha teaches faith. For him, even taking things on reason is a type of faith. Just because something is reasonable doesn't guarantee that it's going to be true. But when something is reasonable, it's a lot easier to act on it and not feel torn up inside. He also asks that when you take something on faith, you have to remind yourself of how little you really do know. The assumptions you act on may seem the most reasonable, and so far in your experience they may have given the best results when you act on them, but the more clearly you realize that this doesn't constitute real knowledge, the more you're spurred to continue practicing until you really do know.

The Buddha gives the example of an elephant hunter in the forest. The elephant hunter wants a big bull elephant to do the work he needs done. So he goes into the forest and he sees big footprints. Now, because he's an experienced elephant hunter, he doesn't immediately jump to the conclusion that these must be the footprints of a bull elephant. After all, there are dwarf females with big feet. They can't do the work he wants done. But he sees that the footprints *may* indicate a bull elephant, so he follows them. Notice that. He does follow them. He doesn't say, "Well, I don't really know, so I might as well give up. I'll follow something only if I know it'll lead to a bull elephant." He wants the elephant but he doesn't know for sure where it is. These seem to be the most likely footprints, so he follows them. Then he sees scratch marks high up in the trees. Again, he doesn't jump to the conclusion that those must be the marks of a big bull elephant, because there are tall females with tusks. They could have made those marks. But he keeps following the tracks. And finally he comes to a clearing where he actually sees a big bull elephant. That's when he knows that he's got the elephant he wants.

The same holds true with the practice. When you experience the pleasure of jhana, when you attain psychic powers: Those are just footprints and scratch marks. The real thing is when you've had an experience of the deathless. You realize that these assumptions that you acted on — the power of your actions, the truth of causality — are principles that have held good from the time of the Buddha until now. Your assumption that if you act in certain ways, the results

tend to follow a pattern; your assumption that it's worth your while in this short and uncertain life to devote as much time as you can to the training of the mind: You've found that those assumptions worked. They've led you to a genuine happiness you know for sure. You know that this happiness doesn't depend on the aggregates, doesn't depend on space or time. It's not going to be touched by the death of the body. That's when you know you've found the bull elephant. That's when you really know that the Buddha's teachings are true.

So the realization that you're taking certain things on faith, but you don't really know them: That's meant to be a spur to continue with the practice. Whatever doubts you might have are not considered a vice or something to be denied, for that would create lots of dishonesty in the mind. Instead, you acknowledge them and take them as an incentive to practice further until you get to the point someday when you really know for yourself. For sure.

It's in this way that the Buddha's teachings on kamma and rebirth are not an insult to your intelligence. Instead they're a spur to use your intelligence even further so that you can get yourself out of the ignorance into which we are born and into the knowledge of a happiness that doesn't die.

The Human Condition

January 10, 2005

Human life, when you think about it, can be pretty miserable. Think of how few people actually get what they want out of life, and yet how much they're driven by their desires. Sometimes their inability to get what they want can be blamed on laziness, but often it's because of factors totally beyond their control. A wave comes up out of the ocean, washing thousands of people away, and all their plans, their hopes, their desires get washed away as well. What we're left with is thousands of corpses, wrecked buildings — and that's just one day's events. The days add up to years, and the years to centuries: centuries of frustrated desires. So what we need is a way of dealing with frustrated desire, and that's one of the gifts the Buddha offers us.

He talks about the emotions that come from desire. There's grief, there's joy, and there's equanimity. He divides each of these into two types: householder grief and renunciate grief; householder joy and renunciate joy; householder equanimity and renunciate equanimity. He uses these different emotions as a way of mapping out the path.

Most of us live in householder grief, householder joy, and householder equanimity. Householder grief is the type that comes when you don't get the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations you want. You don't get the ideas you want. Householder joy is when you finally do get what you want in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. Householder equanimity is when you stay equanimous in the midst of these things, whether they're good or bad.

Most of us muck around in these three types of emotions. We suffer grief and so we look for joy in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. When we don't get what we want, that brings more grief, but we turn around to look for joy in the same places.

What the Buddha wants us to do is to turn our attention to what he calls renunciate grief, renunciate joy, renunciate equanimity. Renunciate grief is when you reflect on how you haven't attained what you want in terms of freeing the

mind from suffering. You haven't reached the goal of the path. Renunciate joy is the joy that comes when you *have* reached the goal. And then renunciate equanimity is the peace and equanimity that come when you know the path is completed.

One of the Buddha's most interesting tactics is that when we suffer from householder grief, the way to get ourselves above and beyond that is to try to transform it, not into householder joy, but into renunciate grief. Householder grief and joy, he says, don't provide us with much hope, whereas renunciate grief at least gives us some hope. It points to the way out.

One way to foster renunciate grief is to reflect on the limitations of human life. That chant we had just now, "I am subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation from all that I love," followed by the reflection on kamma: In the full text of the sutta, the Buddha doesn't stop there, with just the fact that *you* are subject to these things. He says to reflect on the fact that all people, all beings — man, woman, child, ordained or not, whatever level of being you're on — are subject to these things.

This is one of the ways the Buddha repeatedly has us approach all our grief and dissatisfaction. He says, "Open your eyes. Are you the only person suffering these things?" This is his solution for the question, "Why me?" The answer, of course, is that it's not just you. It happens to everybody with no exceptions. It's amazing what opening your eyes like this will do for you. And it's ironic, how realizing the huge amount of suffering in every life can make *your* suffering seem less. But it works. It changes your whole perspective. You start seeing the futility of looking for your happiness in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas.

In other words, the Buddha basically wants you to transform your grief into *samvega*, an overwhelming sense of dismay, not at your own personal problems, but at the nature of human existence as a whole. And the reason for this is that *samvega* motivates you to look for a way out. Of course, *samvega* on its own is not a very comfortable emotion to have. But it provides the impetus to *pasada*, the sense of confidence that there must be a way out.

The way to work with renunciate grief is not to go looking for sights, sounds, and so forth. You work with it by focusing your efforts on following the path. This is why this kind of grief is a useful grief. It keeps you on the path of practice. Often you hear people saying, "Don't try to push too hard in the practice; don't have any sense of goal, because you'll get frustrated over the fact that you haven't

reached your goal.” But that closes all the doors. What you want is the attitude that “I’m not where I want to be, but there is a way to get where I want to be.” That gives you the right sense of direction. You’re not going back to householder joy, with all its uncertainties. You’re aiming at renunciate joy.

So whenever you find yourself asking, “Why me?” the answer is always, “Well, why not you? It happens to everybody.” And what are you going to do about it? You can’t just stew around in your own personal problems. You can deal with them, but the only way to do that is to open up to the larger perspective that enables you to get something out of the grief, to get something out of the disappointment.

This is why Ajaan Lee focuses so much on what are called the eight worldly dhammas: gain, loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, and pain. He says all eight of them have their uses. We don’t like the negative ones, but they have their uses for developing a sense of direction. When loss hits you, if you can realize, “Oh, this is what happens to human beings everywhere,” then you can take it as a lesson so that you don’t get carried away by gain when gain comes back. The same with loss of status: This is what happens to people when they lose status. After all, whose was it? Status is something the world gives you. You may feel that you’ve earned it, but if the world gives it, the world can take it away.

Instead of taking these things personally, you use the gains, you use the status, for whatever purposes you find skillful. When you lose these things, you can learn lessons. You can turn loss to a useful purpose as well. At the very least, you learn who your true friends are, both inside and out. If you got complacent when you were wealthy and powerful, you can now see if complacency is really your friend. This way you can reflect on the nature of the human condition and not get carried away by the good things when they come back again.

This is how the Buddha has you deal with disappointment. Don’t try to assuage it by looking for more pleasure in worldly things, for that, he says, is why most people get entangled in sensuality. They don’t see any other escape from pain, disappointment, and grief, aside from scrambling after sensual pleasures, worldly things. He tells you to set your sights in a different direction. Renunciate grief, even though it’s still a kind of grief, is better than getting lost in householder grief and joy, because renunciate grief can lead to renunciate joy, the kind of joy that’s not affected by any change at all.

That's why we're working on the sense of ease and wellbeing that comes from having the mind in concentration. That's part of the path toward renunciate joy. We don't have to wait until the very end of the path to gain some of this joy, you know. It comes with the sense of wellbeing you gain when you center the mind. That, in and of itself, reminds you that there are alternatives to running after sensual pleasures. There's the pleasure of a well-centered mind, a mind that's not affected by things, that has its own internal sense of wellbeing. It doesn't need to depend on anything else outside.

So when you find yourself wallowing in grief, remember the Buddha's instructions on where to take that grief, what to do with it, how to find a way out, so that you don't stay stuck in that vicious cycle of going from grief to joy, to grief, to joy, to grief, to grief, to grief based on the ups and downs of things you experience through the senses. Take that grief and point it in another direction.

My English teacher, during my senior year in high school, once made a remark that the sign of a great person is that he or she can reflect on his or her own personal problems but then, from that standpoint, can generalize, universalize them to the human condition as a whole. She was talking about great poets, but it's also the nature of any wise mind not to wallow in its own personal issues, but to generalize from them, to see how this is the way it is for human beings everywhere.

This was what the Buddha did on the night of his Awakening. He remembered his past lives over many eons — if you think you're carrying around a lot of narratives, imagine what he saw — but then he broadened his gaze to encompass the cosmos as a whole. He wasn't the only one suffering rebirth after rebirth. Everybody has been doing this. But only after seeing this as a universal story was he able to see the underlying pattern: People are reborn in line with the quality of their intentional actions based on right or wrong views. That universal insight was what enabled him to turn and look at the present moment, and to look at the right place in the present moment: his own views, his own intentions. Only after looking at the universal picture was he able to depersonalize the issue of suffering and its causes. When he had depersonalized it, he could look at it simply as a process. When he viewed it as a process, he was able to find the way out.

You're not the first person to suffer and you're not going to be the last. If you don't set your sights in the direction of renunciate grief and joy and equanimity,

you'll never find a way out. But if you learn to broaden your gaze to encompass the whole human condition, that's the beginning of the road to freedom.

So broaden your gaze. Don't just look inside. Look around yourself as well, for there are lessons to be learned there, too.

The Path Has a Goal

February 12, 2008

When the Buddha taught the practice as a path, one of the implications is that the path goes somewhere. You follow the path because it takes you where you want to go. That would seem obvious, yet you read so many times that the path is the goal or that it's a path without a goal. What kind of path is that? It's not really a path. You wonder what's going on.

Think about the story of the Buddha in his quest for Awakening: It was nothing but a story of paths and goals. First he mastered some very high levels of concentration that his early teachers taught as the goal. One was the dimension of nothingness; the other was the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. Yet the Buddha realized that neither of these attainments was the goal for which he was looking. So he left those teachers and went off to try to find another path of practice that would take him to his goal: the deathless, a happiness that was free from change, free from aging, illness, and death.

So he tried the path of austerities for a while and that didn't work, either — tried them for six whole years. Imagine the amount of investment he had in hoping they'd work. You don't put yourself through that kind of torment unless you think there's going to be a reward, or without developing a certain amount of pride around your powers of endurance. Yet after six years he realized that that path led nowhere, offered no reward. So he was willing to drop that investment, drop that pride, for the sake of something better.

That's when he remembered the time when he was young and, while his father was plowing, he sat under a tree and entered the first jhana. The question came to his mind: Could this be the path? And his mind gave an intuitive response: Yes.

So he followed that path and he found that it involved more than just the practice of jhana, which is just one of the factors of the path. When he finally reached the deathless, he realized that the path leading him there had seven other factors. And he knew this because these factors, acting together, brought

him to the deathless. It really did go where he wanted to go. So the first thing he taught was the path, and that was his central teaching for the rest of his life.

At one point in his later years he compared himself to a man who had gone through the jungle and found an old path. It was all overgrown, but he followed it and found that it led to an old capital city that had once been prosperous. The buildings were somewhat fallen down, but they were still livable. It was still a glorious city. So he went out of the jungle and told the king: Get your men to clear this path and it will take you to this wonderful, glorious city.

So the imagery throughout the Buddha's teachings is that if you follow this path, it goes someplace. And the place where it goes is really special: free from aging, illness, and death; a happiness totally unconditioned.

But some people have raised the question: What about the Buddha's earlier attainments, the dimension of nothingness, the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception? After all, the Buddha does point out in some of his other suttas that you can use these attainments as the path as well. Based on these attainments, you can develop the discernment that leads to release. What's the proper attitude to have toward the Buddha's earlier attainments?

First, remember that the Buddha's early teachers had viewed these attainments as the goal. Once you got there, you just stopped. That was it. You continued practicing these things but that was it. You didn't take them anywhere else. The Buddha, however, regarded them as a path to something further. In other words, he used them as a basis for further insight. Instead of seeing them as goals, he saw them as a path. He didn't equate goals with path. He made a clear distinction.

It's like somebody scrambling through a forest and finally arriving at a good road. But instead of following the road to a good place, he just lies down in the road. That's what the Buddha's earlier teachers were doing. You know what happens when you lie down in roads. You get run over. Aging, illness, and death can come barreling down the road at any time.

So when you get to the road, you follow it. You develop your concentration together with all the other elements of the path, and then you find that it really does lead to something special. So whatever you hear about goal-less paths or paths that are goals.... Just recently I read about a meditator who has been meditating for 30 years. He calls himself an experienced meditator and he says that he hasn't gotten anywhere but that's perfectly fine with him because that's the whole point of meditation: realizing there's nowhere to go. I don't know

which is more disheartening, the fact that he's been such a lousy meditator for so long or that he feels so good about being a lousy meditator.

You can't take people like that seriously. You can't take them as guides. The Buddha taught skills that get results. That, he said, is the test for any kind of practice: the results it leads to. When he taught the Kalamas, he told them that when you see for yourself that following a certain practice leads to a blameless happiness, follow that practice. If you see that a practice is praised by the wise, follow that practice. If a practice leads to unskillful behavior rooted in greed, anger, and delusion; unskillful behavior in taking life, breaking any of the precepts, having wrong views, having greed, ill will, any of these things: Realize that that path of practice leads you to a bad place, so don't go there. Follow the path that actually gives good results.

This whole pattern of cause and effect, action and result, is our guideline. It's our test for what's a good path and what's not. So when someone is bragging that they have a path that doesn't lead to results, you know that they've been following a bad path. You look for the path that does give results and doesn't scoff at people who want results. It's very sad when you hear about people saying, "Do you want happiness? An unconditioned happiness? Poor you." What's wrong with wanting a happiness that's totally blameless, a happiness that doesn't take anything away from anyone else? If you don't have that kind of happiness, the only kind of happiness you're going to find in life is the type that does take things from others.

I was reading a while back about a teacher who said he wouldn't want to live in a world without suffering because he wouldn't then be able to exercise his compassion — which is a very selfish wish: You want there to be people who are suffering so that you can enjoy being compassionate to them? Your sense of wellbeing needs to feed off other people's pain? What kind of ideal is that? The best possible ideal is to follow a path leading to a happiness that doesn't depend on other people's suffering in any way, shape, or form. Then you can show that path to other people. If they feel so moved, they can practice it, too. That's the way the Buddha taught, and there hasn't been any improvement on it since.

So there's nothing wrong with having a goal. As the Buddha said, the anguish that comes from realizing that you haven't reached your goal is much better than the pleasure that comes from indulging in sensual pleasures. He talks about worldly or householder grief and renunciate grief. Householder joy and renunciate joy. Householder equanimity and renunciate equanimity. Householder

grief is realizing that you'd like to have pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas, but you've got unpleasant ones. For most people, the antidote to that is to find pleasant ones, i.e., householder joy. But that's not the path the Buddha recommends. He recommends that if you have householder grief, try to replace it with renunciate grief. In other words, even though things are uncomfortable outside, that's not the real problem. The real problem is that you haven't found a deathless happiness inside. The grief that comes when you reflect on the fact that you haven't reached the deathless yet motivates you in the right direction: to follow the path leading to renunciate joy. That's the joy that comes when you realize that the qualities you've developed inside really have led to Awakening. From there you go to renunciate equanimity, the peace of mind that comes when you've attained your goal.

People often have immature attitudes about goals, which is why some teachers say to drop all idea of goals when you meditate. That may be a useful attitude for short-term meditation, but for the long term it leads to experienced meditators whose experience of meditation is of going nowhere, and who develop a perverse pride around their nowhere as well. The long-term solution is to develop a mature attitude toward your goal, one that realizes that even though the path may take time, you can take comfort in the fact that it's a good path and it's headed in the right direction. This is the mature kind of attitude that really does yield results. There is a deathless happiness, and it can be found through your efforts. Don't let anyone else tell you otherwise.

Not What You Are, What You Do

August 24, 2007

When you first look at a teaching like dependent co-arising, it seems very abstract and very far away from anything you might be doing in the practice. But if you look at it more carefully, you see that it makes a whole series of important statements that have an immediate bearing on what you're doing right here.

To begin with, when the Buddha talks about the causes of suffering, he doesn't trace it back to what you are. He doesn't say you suffer because you're basically bad, or because you're basically good but somehow have been socially conditioned to forget your true inner goodness. He comes back instead to what you do. That right there is a radical statement, and it opens huge possibilities. It's hard to change what you are, but you can change your actions simply through knowledge, through understanding which things you do are going to cause suffering, which states of mind lead to suffering. You can look for those and you can change them.

To the extent the Buddha does talk about what you are, it's far along the path of dependent co-arising, way up there in what's called *bhava* or becoming. It's not a question of what you inherently are, good or bad. Very simply, your being comes about from what you do. That's the reverse of the way most of us think. Most of us think that our basic nature is a certain way, and we act in certain ways because of our basic nature. The Buddha says instead that what you are — in the sense of how you identify yourself on a sensual level, on the level of form, or on a formless level — can be traced back to what you do. You can learn to do things in a more skillful way, which will lead to a change in your sense of what you are, and that in turn will be less and less likely to cause suffering.

This is why the Buddha's teaching is a training, because the kind of ignorance it's meant to overcome is not an ignorance of what you are; it's simply a practical ignorance of which kinds of actions work for true happiness and which kinds don't. That's the basic principle of the four noble truths. Each of the knowledges in the four noble truths deals with a task that you develop as a skill. That in and of itself is another important statement. If the ignorance at the root

of the problem were simply a matter of not knowing your true nature, it would be an all-or-nothing sort of thing. You'd know it or you wouldn't. But skills can be developed gradually. Your sensitivity develops, your dexterity at shaping things more skillfully, more appropriately, develops over time. So the path overcoming this practical ignorance isn't a sudden, all-or-nothing sort of path. It's a gradual path, a gradual training, in gaining more and more skill.

It's in this way that the teachings of dependent co-arising are directly connected to what you're doing right now. You're focusing on your breath. You're directing your thoughts to the breath and evaluating the breath. You use certain perceptions, and certain feelings get involved. These are all elements in the factor of fabrication, which comes right after ignorance. We breathe ignorantly. We perceive things through ignorance. Our thoughts about things, the way we evaluate things, and our use of language generally are done with ignorance. As a result, we suffer.

But if you bring knowledge to these processes, they can actually become a healing kind of fabrication. After all, the path is a path of fabrication. The Buddha doesn't tell you just to drop all activity at once, to be totally passive or totally devoid of any kind of intention. We hear that the goal at the end of the path is to be free from fabrication, so we think we'll just stop fabricating and that should get us there. But the mind can't do that. The path doesn't work that way. The intention to stop fabricating is itself an intention. You can get very much attached to that kind of passivity and still be stuck with all your problems.

So instead we bring more and more knowledge to the process of breathing and how we use our thoughts around the process of breathing. Sometimes you hear that our thinking, which is based a lot on language, is the reason why we suffer, that we picked up these bad social influences that taught us to think in dualistic terms or whatever, so we've got to drop language entirely. But again, that's not the Buddha's approach. He says that if you use language in ignorance, you're going to suffer. But the problem is not with language; it's with the ignorance.

I was talking to a Hindu monk a while back, and he told me his response to someone who came up to him and asked, "How can we get beyond duality?" His response was: "What's wrong with duality? You're talking to me, aren't you?" Language is useful because it makes distinctions. If you couldn't make distinctions, how could we communicate? What would our language be like? It would be like speaking in tongues at a Pentecostal Church: *booh!* Who knows

what it means? It doesn't mean anything, or could mean everything, which is a totally useless language.

The mind has to make distinctions. We feel distinctions. We have a sense of right and wrong not simply because we're taught them by society. It's a deeply ingrained habit that comes from our sense that some things are painful and some things are not, and you've got to do something about the things that are painful. This goes deep into our sense of feeling and perception, mental fabrications that are often pre-linguistic. Deep down inside, we know that anything that threatens our existence is bad, anything that helps it is good. Even lizards know this much. That's why it's embedded in the lizard brain, a very strong sense of lizard good and lizard bad. The hatred of pain, the love of pleasure, the ability to perceive an enemy, to perceive an escape from an enemy: These are really basic to the mind, much prior to any kind of social conditioning. Our social conditioning, our more refined uses of language, are actually needed to mitigate some of those lizard fears and knee-jerk judgments.

So instead of throwing out language or throwing out our social conditioning, we learn how to use them more skillfully. And working with the breath is an ideal place to start. You give space to the mind by breathing in a way that feels good. You can use your linguistic habits to talk to yourself about the breath: How does this breath feel? How does that breath feel? Where would it feel good to breathe right now? Which part of the body needs a larger dose of good breath energy? In this way you get more and more in touch with the immediate feeling of your body so that your linguistic habits can show immediate benefits. It feels good to breathe this way. It feels good to breathe that way. Your mind and your body are getting more intimate so that all the levels of fabrication — physical, verbal, and mental — start working together around a common sense of wellbeing.

In this way they get to communicate with one another. The process of focusing on the breath in a skillful way is really a healing process. Each time you sit down to meditate, don't think of it as a chore. Think of it as an opportunity to do some more healing work. And don't think of it as a time when you're obliged to stop thinking. In the beginning, you have to use directed thought and evaluation to get things to settle down, to adjust things, to get everybody together. And when everyone is together like this, interesting things come up. Hidden feelings, hidden perceptions suddenly show themselves. And you can work through them.

It's almost like dealing with a person who's possessed. The possessed person from the point of view of Western psychology is a schizophrenic: There are two different personalities in the one person. From a more traditional perspective, there really are two different people in there. The problem is that they're not cooperating. They're working at cross purposes. If they can learn to cooperate, there's no problem. Who cares whether there are two or twenty people in there? If they get along, the problem is gone. That's how Ajaan Fuang approached cases of spirit possession. Instead of driving out the spirit, he'd negotiate with it, so that it would stop interfering in the possessed person's life.

We have the same sort of problem even though we may seem normal. Our directed thoughts and evaluations tend to work at cross purposes. The way we feel and our different perceptions can be running off in every direction at once. This is why we have to meditate. To work with the breath is to create a space where all the different parts of the mind — all the different members of the committee, all the different levels of sensation and activity going on — learn how to be with one another in a peaceful spot, working on a common goal. You're showing goodwill for one another because you're cooperating. In that way, interesting things come up and you can deal with them. You can learn new habits in how you relate to your body, new habits in how you think, how you frame an issue in the mind, and how you work through the difficulties in whatever issues you encounter. When you learn how to deal with all the parts of yourself in a healthy way like this, it's a lot easier then to start dealing in a healthy way with other people, too.

So the breath meditation not only helps you. It also helps everybody else you live with, because it gives you paradigms. For one thing, it gives you immediate training in how to employ the *brahma-viharas*, the sublime attitudes of limitless goodwill, limitless compassion, limitless empathetic joy, limitless equanimity. In other words, you start out with goodwill for yourself, allowing yourself to breathe in a comfortable way. When you see that your breathing is uncomfortable, or that the way you think is causing dis-ease in the body or the mind, you have compassion for yourself: "Let's try to figure out a better way to do this." When it's going well, you don't start feeding on the idea that you're not worthy of this, or that you really shouldn't allow yourself to feel this good. You try to maintain that sense of wellbeing. Appreciate it. Let the ideas of deserving and not deserving just go by the boards. Again, those attitudes are usually based on an idea of what you are deep down inside, that you're the sort of person who deserves to be

punished for things you did in the past. That's not how the Buddha's teachings work. Different actions will inevitably lead to different results. There's no question of anyone deserving to suffer. So if you're able to maintain a sense of wellbeing, keep at it. If you're operating from a stable sense of wellbeing, you're going to start acting in more skillful ways all around.

And then there's equanimity for the things that you can't change, the bad habits you aren't able to fully eradicate, or the problems that come in from past kamma that you can't alter. The purpose of equanimity is to keep you focused on the things you *can* change, so that you don't waste energy focusing on the things you can't.

In this way, as the members of your committee work together on the breath in a skillful way, you're gaining some training in what are essentially social virtues, the brahmaviharas. Then you can apply the same lessons to your dealings with people around you.

So instead of being a process of lobotomizing the mind so that you don't think, meditation is actually training in learning how to think in more skillful ways, how to act in more skillful ways — with knowledge, with an understanding of actions and their results. In particular, it's training in learning how to distinguish the types of activities in the mind that would cause a particular situation to produce suffering or not.

In the course of this training, the question of who you are gets put aside. The question of who you've been gets put aside. You can focus purely on what you're doing, what you can do to train yourself to be more sensitive and more effective in bringing about an end to suffering, and what you can do to master activities that lead more and more to true happiness. After all, the issue is not what you *are*, it's what you *do*. And if what you do is not skillful, you can learn to make it more skillful with each in-and-out breath.

Those are some of the lessons that you can derive from what seems like a very abstract teaching on dependent co-arising. It is abstract. It's put out as a list and it's a very convoluted one. As the Buddha himself admitted, it's not simple. It's like a tangled bird's nest, he said, or a knotted ball of string. But you can pull on a few strands, pull out a few of the twigs, and you find that even the individual strands and twigs are really helpful in putting an end to suffering, teaching you how to think and act and even breathe in ways that can bring suffering to an end.

The Regularity of the Dhamma

May 22, 2006

There's a school of thought that says each present moment is so new and so unpredictable that you shouldn't bring any preconceived notions from the past to apply to it. Any conditions you pick up from the past obscure the freshness of the present moment, so your duty as a meditator is to be totally present in an unmediated way to the raw data of the senses. By allowing yourself to be fully immersed in the raw data of the present moment, you'll instinctively know the proper response. There are no rules. All bets are off as to what's going to be the appropriate response to any particular moment, any particular situation.

That school of thought leaves you pretty high and dry when things get difficult. It throws you into the present moment with no lifesaver at all. Fortunately, that's not how the Buddha taught. The Buddha said that there's a regularity to the way things happen. That's how he describes dependent co-arising: "this regularity of the Dhamma." He doesn't say that everything is predetermined from the past, or that by knowing the past you'll be able to predict what's going to happen in the present or on into the future. He simply says that there's a regularity to the way things are shaped in your experience, and certain things tend to be the shaping factors.

In one analysis of dependent co-arising, he describes these factors as name and form on the one hand, and consciousness on the other. These two influence each other. Form is the form of the body. For example, you're sitting here right now with the form of the body, your sense of the body, how it feels from within. That sense of form is made up of solidity, warmth, liquid sensations, and energy: the four elements or four properties. As for name, it includes feeling, perception, attention, intention, and contact. Consciousness, he says, lands on these factors of name and form, and then things proliferate out of that.

Under the heading of name, the two most important factors are intention and attention. Other ways of describing dependent co-arising draw out this importance. Sometimes, prior to name and form, they list fabrication, *sankhara*, which is the intentional element in experience — whether physical, verbal, or

mental. Physical or bodily fabrication is the breath, the intentional element in how you sense the breath, how you create the experience of the breath. Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation, which includes an intentional element. Mental fabrication is feeling and perception. There's an intentional element there as well. So the intention is what's important, and it plays itself out in feeling, perception, and form.

Prior to fabrication comes ignorance. Ignorance means not seeing things in terms of the four noble truths — in other words, applying inappropriate attention. When you look at things in an inappropriate way, you frame issues in an inappropriate way, which means that your fabrications are going to lead to suffering. All the other elements of name and form and consciousness will tend toward suffering and stress as well. But you can change that way of attending to things. You can look at things in terms of the four noble truths: Where is the stress, what are you doing to cause it, where is there freedom from stress, and what kind of actions lead to that freedom? When you look in these terms, then the fabrications of your intentions go in a different direction; name and form and consciousness, all the other factors of your experience, go in a different direction: toward the end of suffering. This is the regularity of the Dhamma.

We tend to think of dependent co-arising as an extremely complex and abstruse teaching, and as the Buddha pointed out it *is* complex; it's not easy. Still, it does give us guidance in how to approach each present moment, where to look, how to look. One of the interesting things about dependent co-arising is that all these factors come prior to sensory contact. Even before you see sights, listen to sounds, and so forth, there's an intentional element already in play. You have an agenda: what you're looking for, how you're going to look at things. You bring that to each present moment. So it's important to bring the right way of framing issues, framing questions, to everything you sense. Remember this as you practice. These are the important elements: intention and attention. Everything else springs from there.

When things come up in the present moment, how do you look at them? Try to look at them simply in terms of stress and lack of stress. Which intentions and ways of attending to things lead to stress; which ones bring it to an end? Try to put aside any ideas of yourself or what lies outside of yourself. Put aside questions of what lies behind all of this. Just look at things as they're directly experienced as stress. This is a mode of perception that's important to develop.

The Buddha calls this mode “emptiness”: seeing what’s present or what’s not present — particularly, present or not present in terms of stress or disturbance. That’s where the big issue lies, and your duties as a meditator come from looking at these things in this way. If you see stress, you try to comprehend it. To do that, you need to develop certain qualities of mind: That’s the path. You need to put the mind in a position where it really can look at stress coming and going, and not feel threatened by it, especially when the stress is really painful, really burdensome.

Our normal reaction when we feel stress and strain is to say, “This is happening to *me*.” And when something bad happens to *you*, there’s a different set of imperatives. The imperative is to get rid of it, to get it out of the range of what you identify as “*me*.” But if you can pull out of that sense of “*me*” surrounding your experience and simply look at the stress happening right here, right now — from a position of wellbeing, the wellbeing that comes from right concentration — then the imperatives are different. The imperative is to understand the stress, to see what’s causing it, and then to abandon the cause.

This is why we practice right concentration: to put the mind in a good position to see things clearly and carry out its appropriate duties. Actually, when the mind is in right concentration you’re standing where the Buddha stood when he discovered all of these things. It’s from this point of view that you can see: “This is the intention; this is the act of attention; this is the stress; this is the cause of stress.” You can see them clearly because you’re looking at them from the right spot.

Years back I went on a camping trip to Powell Point, which is the southern tip of a plateau in Utah, over 10,000 feet in elevation. The guidebook said that you could see a good third of southern Utah from that spot. We thought we were following the right directions, but we made a wrong turn and ended up in an outlook over Henderson Canyon. Still, we thought we were at Powell Point. The book said the road would end and then from there you had to walk out on a point. Well, we found a point that we could walk out to. From there, the book said, you could look out and see this, that, and the other thing. So we identified the sights: This was this, that was that, and this was the other thing. But then there was a huge plateau looming up to our east, which wasn’t mentioned in the book at all. Only after a good while did we realize that that was Powell Point. We had made a wrong turn. We were standing somewhere else. So, the next day we made our way up to Powell Point, and then we saw what the guide book was

actually referring to. We realized that the this, that, and the other thing were not the this, that, and the other thing we thought we saw yesterday. We had labeled things wrong because we were standing in the wrong place.

If you want to understand what the Buddha is talking about, you have to put yourself here, right at the present moment, where the mind is immersed in the form, the breath energy, of the body. That's where the Buddha stood. If there's going to be any directed thought and evaluation, relate it to the breath. Any feelings and perceptions will be the feelings and perceptions of a mind really focused on the breath. As the mind gets more and more still, those fabrications fall away. Directed thoughts and evaluations fall away. The movement of the breath falls away. All you have is a still breath energy filling the body, a clear, bright awareness filling the body. That's Powell Point. From there you can see the Henry Mountains, you can see the Escalante region, you can see Bryce Canyon, the way they're described in the book.

In other words, from this point you can see stress, and you're in a position where you can really comprehend it because you don't feel so threatened by it. You're not compelled by your old imperative, which was to get rid of it. You attend to things in the right way. You see things simply in terms of stress, its cause, the path leading to its ending, and its ending. This is the framework you're supposed to bring to each present moment. In other words, you see things in terms of the four noble truths, and your intention is to perform the duties appropriate to each. When you develop that intention, it's bound to lead you to the end of all suffering and stress.

So this is the regularity of the Dhamma. You may not be able to bring purely appropriate attention to every moment of your life, but you can get used to looking at each moment in terms of identifying your intention and examining how you frame the events of your life. Do the narratives get in the way of your seeing things in terms of skillful and unskillful intentions? Or do they actually help? You should approach each situation with these thoughts in mind: Where is the stress here? What can you do to at least minimize the stress, the harm, the disturbance, whatever is a burden for you or the people around you? This way you come to each present moment armed with a knowledge of the regularity of the Dhamma: where you should focus your attention, and what the main priority should be — which is to keep on the path.

In this way the Buddha doesn't leave you high and dry, for no matter what the situation, this is how to look at it: in terms of the four noble truths. Your

intention should be to try to comprehend the suffering, the stress, wherever it may be in that moment, and to develop the factors that will enable you to comprehend suffering. You may have other issues — for example, when you're dealing with people, it's very different from sitting here with your eyes closed — but your basic framework can be the same. Once you've got this framework firmly in mind, you can go wherever you want and deal with any situation that confronts you, because you're working from a framework that instead of leading to more suffering and stress, actually helps bring them to an end. And that way, whatever the situation, you're on the path.

The ability to keep all this in mind is mindfulness. That, combined with appropriate attention and the right intention, is what turns each moment into a moment of the practice, regardless of the situation.

So this is how the complexity of dependent co-arising gives you tools for the present moment, tools that you can use for the sake of your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of all the people around you. Each moment may be new, but it follows a pattern. Always keep that pattern in mind.

The Path of Mistakes

March 26, 2007

An essential aspect of Buddhist practice is that we have to learn how to make use of things we'll eventually have to learn how to let go of. We know that at some point the practice involves letting go of desire. But we need to cultivate skillful desire to get to that point. Ultimately the practice leads to the total end of fabrication, but the noble eightfold path is a type of fabrication. As the Buddha once said, it's the ultimate level of fabrication. In fact when you look at the factors of the path you realize that they're made up of the aggregates: form, feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness.

These all have to play a role in the path, which means we have to learn how to change our attitude toward the aggregates. Instead of just clinging to them as us or ours, we learn how to use them as elements in the path. The important point here is to realize that these things have to be used in a skillful way.

When you come to the path, it's useful to reflect on skills you've developed in the past — as an artist, a cook, a carpenter, or a musician. Whatever skills you've worked on in the past, it's good to reflect on how you became skillful, and particularly how you learned how to deal with mistakes.

Learning from your mistakes is essential to developing any kind of skill. It's expected that you're going to make mistakes. The teacher tries to help you avoid the really unnecessary ones by pointing them out in advance. In other words, some mistakes are more avoidable than others. But a large part of the practice lies in learning how to learn from your mistakes and not get knocked off course by them.

We all like to hear that there's a stage in the practice when you finally attain a certain level of awareness, a certain level of insight, and it's guaranteed that from that point on nothing you might do would be a mistake. You may have heard about the "choicelessness" of the path: You finally get on the path and realize that there's only one thing to do. If you just do what the path tells you to do, or what seems right at any one time, you're guaranteed that there will be no mistakes. But that's not the way it works. Even arahants make mistakes. Their

virtues in terms of the basics of a virtuous life — the five precepts — are unshakeable. They don't make those mistakes any more, but simple mistakes in saying the wrong thing to the wrong person: That's human. It has nothing to do with defilements of the mind. It's simply the fact that we're human beings with limitations.

What's different about arahants is that they continue to learn from their mistakes. They don't get knocked off course by them because they have no conceit that's going to be challenged by the mistake, destroyed by the mistake, or feel threatened by the mistake. But for those of us on the path, that's an issue we still have to deal with: this issue of conceit, our narcissism. We don't like the thought of having to make mistakes, but there's no other way we're going to learn. This is why the Buddha gives so many instructions on how to learn from your mistakes, how to deal with a mistake so that it actually becomes an important element in the path. There are the instructions to Rahula: When you realize you've done something that's been harmful, you resolve not to repeat it. You also go talk it over with other people who are on the path to see what insight you can gain from them. In other words, you admit the mistake, you learn how to recognize it, and that involves developing a certain amount of perceptiveness right there.

And as for learning from the counsel of others: We sometimes assume that the Buddha's instructions to the Kalamas tell you to go by your own sense of right and wrong. But in fact, if you look carefully at his words, you realize that this assumption has nothing to do with what the Buddha actually said. He said that you can't go totally on the instructions of others, but you can't go on your own preconceived ideas about what's right and wrong, either. You have to look at what you're doing, along with the results of what you're doing and what you've done. Then learn to recognize when you've caused harm and when you haven't.

At the same time, you take into consideration the counsel of the wise. That, of course, requires you to learn how to recognize who's wise and who's not. So in one way it does throw the whole issue back on you, but it's not that you have to totally reinvent the Dhamma wheel as you practice. There *is* guidance, and when you learn how to make the best use of guidance, it gives you quite a leg up.

There's another passage where a student of the Jains comes to the Buddha. The Jains were teaching that whoever kills, steals, has illicit sex, tells lies, or takes intoxicants is going to go to hell. This person wanted to know what the Buddha had to say about that, and the Buddha replied that if you hear that teaching and

you realize you've done these things in the past, that pretty much consigns you to hell right there; it makes things hopeless.

This is why the Buddha taught in a different way. He taught that these activities are unwise. They should be avoided because they cause harm. You look at what you've done and you realize you've made mistakes like this. So what's the proper attitude to develop toward those mistakes? It's to resolve not to do them again. At the same time, you realize that if you let yourself get tied up in remorse about your past mistakes, it's not going to undo the old mistake and it's going to make it less likely that you're going to do well in the future — because remorse saps your strength. The proper attitude is to learn how to recognize a mistake and simply resolve, "I'm not going to repeat it."

The next step is to develop the sublime attitudes: limitless goodwill, limitless compassion, limitless empathetic joy, limitless equanimity. Learn how to cultivate these emotions, because they help keep you on the right track, strengthen your resolve not to be harmful, and also teach you where your limitations are: what you can do, what you can't do in terms of correcting the situation within yourself and the world around you.

Again, these attitudes, too, are fabrications. It's not that our nature is innately kind or innately bad. These attitudes are things you have to learn how to cultivate. They're fabrications. So what happens when you come up against some ill will inside you, some resentment, or an inability to accept the situation as it is? When you look at that emotion, you realize it's composed of all the different elements of fabrication. There's the way you breathe. There are the directed thoughts: the way you direct your thinking around that topic. There's the way you evaluate what's happening, and there are also your feelings and perceptions about what's happening. These are all the elements of fabrication that go into any thought, any emotion.

So, to begin with, you want to learn how to take your unskillful emotions apart. When you find yourself thinking in an unskillful way, when an unskillful emotion comes up with regard either to yourself or somebody else, ask yourself, "What kind of breathing is going on here? How does the breathing affect that emotion? What if I were to make the breath more skillful — making it smooth, making it full, making it restful: Will that help get the body out of the grip of the emotion?"

Then look at how you're thinking about the issue. Is there some way you could change your thoughts about the issue? Look at it from a different

perspective. A lot of the Buddha's teachings, say, on anger, are just that. Look at the situation from another angle. Look at the good in the people who make you angry. After all, you need their good as much as they do. If all you can see are the bad traits of other people, it's like being in a desert: You're hot, tired, trembling, thirsty, and the goodness of other people is like water. You're not in some Olympian position where you can look down on the human race and say, "Well, they're bad, and these people are bad, and those people are bad," and it doesn't affect you at all. It does affect you to be constantly focusing on other people's bad habits. It's like that *New Yorker* cartoon of the two female poodles sitting at a bar with grim, sneering looks on their faces, saying, "They're all sons of bitches." When everyone is a son of a bitch, what does that make you? So try to think about the situation in a way that helps you realize that you need the water of their goodness. This waters the goodness of your own heart, this change in the element of perception along with directed thought and evaluation.

As for the feelings that come up, learn not to identify with them. Just watch them: "Okay, these feelings are results of actions. They, in and of themselves, are not skillful or unskillful, but the way you perceive them and the thoughts you build around them — *those* can be skillful and unskillful." So learn how to step back.

In this way you use your understanding of fabrication to deconstruct unskillful emotions, unskillful mind states, and then to develop skillful emotions and skillful mind states in their place. We don't usually like the idea of constructing an emotion, or fabricating an emotion: It seems too artificial. But we do it all the time. It's simply that we're not conscious of it.

So as you're meditating, what are you doing? You're working with the breath. That's one form of fabrication. Try to make the breath comfortable. When there's a sense of tension anywhere in the body, learn how to breathe around it, or breathe through it, to relieve as much of the tension as you can without totally losing focus. You direct your thoughts to the breath. You evaluate the breath: "What kind of breathing feels good right now?" This is an important part of the practice because it teaches you how to develop your powers of observation on a subtle level. You're learning to recognize your actions and their results. You're learning how to *read* those actions, *read* those results. And if the results aren't what you want, you can think of ways of improving them. That all comes under evaluation.

Then there are feelings. You try to work with the breath in such a way as to develop feelings of ease and fullness. There are also perceptions. How do you perceive your breath? What mental picture do you have of the breath? How does that mental picture affect the way you actually breathe? Can you think of the breath as an energy field in the body, that your whole awareness of the body right now is all breath, different levels of breath energy? If you apply that perception, hold that label in mind, and explore the way you feel the body from the inside, what does it do? You can think of the body as a big sponge — lots of holes for the breath to come in and out from all directions. The breath comes in and goes out without any sense of blockage, no problem at all. If you perceived it that way, what impact would it have on how you actually experience the breath? In other words, you learn to take these aspects of fabrication and use them to your advantage.

And of course you're going to make mistakes, but you can learn from them — by learning how to notice things on your own, knowing how to seek advice from other people, learning how to apply their advice in a skillful way.

So, on the one hand, the Buddha gives you a lot of instructions on how to avoid mistakes, but he also is very open to the fact that we're still going to make mistakes on one level or another. Instead of forbidding you from making mistakes, he gives you advice: When you make a mistake, this is how you handle it; this is how you learn from it so you can become more skillful.

This is how the process of fabrication can take you to the threshold where there's the unfabricated. You develop your tools, and, as with any art, you're not developing the tools because you want to take the tools with you. Say, for instance, you have some paint brushes. You're not painting for the sake of paint brushes; you use the paint brushes for the sake of the art. And as you master the use of those paint brushes, there comes a point where you've finished your artwork and you put the brushes aside.

It's the same with the path: You work on developing these elements of the path. Learn how to notice when you've done it well and when you haven't. In that way you develop your skill.

This skill, though, is special. It takes you to the threshold of the unfabricated. But you can't use the unfabricated to get to the unfabricated. It can't be used as a cause at all, for it lies totally outside of the realm of causality. But you can get there through causality, through learning fabrication as you learn to fabricate states of mind more and more skillfully.

So don't be afraid of mistakes. Try to avoid them as much as you can, but don't be afraid of the idea that there will be mistakes down the line. As Ajaan Fuang once said, "No matter what happens in the meditation, there's always a cure for it — if you develop the right attitude." So the conceit that says, "I don't want to make any mistakes," and simply wanting to *will* your way to a mistake-free life without doing anything: That you've got to put aside. The narcissism of not wanting anyone to be able to criticize you: That you've got to put aside. As the Buddha once said, "If someone points out your faults, regard that person as someone who's pointed out treasure."

So learn to live with the fact that, yes, we all make mistakes. Even arahants make some mistakes. But a mistake is not the end of the world. It's a start. It's a treasure in that it's your opportunity to learn.

Experimental Intelligence

August 7, 2007

One of the most important principles in meditating on the breath is learning how to experiment with it. Try different kinds of breathing to see which rhythm, which texture of breathing feels best for the body right now, and which is also best for the mind. Some ways of breathing can put you to sleep, other ways of breathing get you irritated, so you want to check and see what kind of breathing is going to make it easiest for the mind to settle down in a state of mindful alertness and want to stay there. If the body is uncomfortable because of the way you breathe, you're not taking advantage of the fact that the breath *can* make it comfortable.

I know a lot of people who are surprised by this aspect of Ajaan Lee's instructions for breath meditation. They come to meditation with the idea that you're supposed to let things simply happen on their own and not do anything to them — that you just watch the breath however it comes in, however it goes out. But even the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation frequently state that you "train" yourself to do things in a certain way. You train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, aware of the whole body as you breathe out. You train yourself so that the breath calms down, giving rise to the next steps, where you can train yourself to breathe in with a sense of ease, with a sense of rapture. And then you can calm those feelings.

There's an element of will in all this, an element of fabrication in which you intentionally cause things to happen. That's important for not only getting the mind to settle down with a sense of ease, but also for developing insight — because insight comes down to a matter of seeing cause and effect.

I think it was Aristotle who defined intelligence as the ability to see connections. When you do X, Y happens. When you do Z, W happens. The ability to see that on your own is a sign of intelligence, and that sort of intelligence can be developed by learning to look for causes and effects. This is how you do it: You change certain things and see where the change has an

impact. You change other things and see where *that* has an impact. If changing X causes Y to change every time, you know that X is a condition for Y.

This principle permeates all of the Buddha's teachings. Everything is checked by the results it gives. When the Buddha was teaching his aunt the basic principles of the Dhamma, it came down to this: When you adopt a particular teaching, what effect does it have? Does it give rise to passion? To being fettered? To accumulating, to self-aggrandizement, to discontent, to entanglement, to laziness, to being burdensome? Then that's a wrong teaching. Does it give rise to the opposite qualities, such as dispassion, modesty, and not being fettered? Okay, that's a right teaching. That's how you know what's Dhamma and what's not. You take all the Dhamma you hear and you test it in terms of cause and effect. You don't take anything for granted just because you've heard that it's so.

Sometimes we hear that the basic Buddhist insight is into the three characteristics — inconstancy, stress, not-self — which doesn't seem to involve many connections between cause and effect. But here you have to remember two things. One, the Buddha never talked about "three characteristics." The phrase "three characteristics" doesn't appear in his teachings. That was something added later in the commentaries. He taught these three themes — inconstancy, stress, not-self — as perceptions and contemplations, as labels you apply to things, and aspects you look for in your experience of things.

But there's a larger context for looking for these things, or learning to see things in light of them. The larger context is formed by the four noble truths: the fact that there is suffering, that there's a cause for suffering, that suffering can cease, and that there's a path of practice leading to its cessation. These truths in turn relate to a more basic issue: that the whole purpose of the Buddha's teachings is for the sake of finding true happiness. And he brings both the heart and the head together on this project.

The heart's basic desire is for happiness with the least amount of effort, whereas the head is the part that recognizes that there are causes and effects, and that if you want to get anywhere, you have to learn this pattern and work within it. In following the Buddha's teachings, these two sides of your awareness, heart and head, have to learn to work together. The heart has to learn respect for the fact that if you want true happiness, it's going to require some work. You'll have to get the causes right. At the same time, the head has to recognize that true happiness is a worthwhile goal. You don't just think about things and analyze them just for the sake of spinning out ideas and showing you're smart. You want

to understand cause and effect so that you can find true happiness. And as the Buddha traces out the causes of suffering, one of the big causes is clinging. So one way of learning how to let go of clinging is to see things in light of those three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. You don't stop with just seeing things in terms of those perceptions. At the same time, you have to learn the right time and place to apply them: when they actually serve the purpose of leading to a greater happiness.

All the teachings have their time and place. You have to see each teaching in the larger structure of this pursuit of happiness, and try to apply it in an intelligent way. A large part of this means that you have to be heedful. You can't just assume that anything that comes popping up in your mind, or any idea that you have, is going to lead to true happiness. You can't assume that any teaching you receive from anybody is going to lead to true happiness, or that you can apply it willy-nilly to everything that comes up. You have to test things to learn when and how they work.

So a central part of the Buddha's teaching consists of instructions in the best way to test things. You start out by getting the mind to be still. Get it into strong states of concentration where everything is very, very still, so that you can observe, when a thought comes into the mind, what it does to the mind; or when you do an action, what it does to the mind. If things aren't really still, you can't see the impact of a thought, the impact of an action very clearly. It's like trying to listen to a very soft piece of music on the stereo at the same time that you've got a lawnmower outside, or trucks driving up and down the road. The background noise is so loud that it obscures the subtleties you're trying to hear. The same way with the mind: Unless you can get the mind really, really still, you can't really watch the effects of your actions, the effects of your words, the effects of your thoughts. Many actions may seem perfectly harmless in an ordinary state of mind, but when the mind gets really, really still, you begin to see that they actually have an adverse impact on the mind.

So this is why we work at bringing the mind to concentration. This is why the Buddha said that concentration should be developed. He didn't say, "States of concentration come and go. You just watch their coming and going and say, 'Ah, yes, this is inconstant, stressful, not-self.'" That's not the duty that the four noble truths assign to concentration. The duty they assign is that when you encounter states of mindfulness, you try to develop them. When you encounter states of concentration, you try to develop them. Make them stronger, because you're

going to need them as tools. Whatever serves as a tool on the path, you want to take care of it. You don't just let it go. The same with the breath: You work with it, you take care of it, because it's going to help you get the mind to settle down. It's going to help give you a good solid foundation.

I know someone who went to study in Thailand after she'd been doing the Ajaan Lee method. She met a teacher who said: "What is this, improving the breath? You're supposed to let it go and be on its own. After all, it's just a *sankhara*, just a fabrication. Why try to improve it?" She reported to me what he had said. My response was: "Go back and ask him, 'Why bathe your body? After all, it's just a *sankhara*, just let it go.'" Of course you can't do that. You've got to look after the body because you're using it as a tool. The same with the breath: You look after the breath, tend to it, because it helps the mind to settle down with a sense of ease and solidity that you're going to need for deeper insights. At the same time, as you're working with the breath, you get insight into cause and effect. Because even when the mind settles down and you see things, you've got to test them.

Sometimes you hear the teaching that once the mind settles down, you get in touch with your Buddha nature or your Inner Stillness, and you can trust whatever your Buddha nature or Inner Stillness tells you. The Buddha never taught that way. Even stream enterers, he said, have got to be heedful. You can't trust everything that comes out of the mind. He even said that arahants had to be heedful about their actions. Even totally enlightened beings can't totally assume that everything they see or hear is actually the way it is. They have to test it.

Go look in the Vinaya. A couple of the rules were actually formulated because some arahants made some mistakes. For instance, there's the rule against monks eating stored-up food. Ven. Belatthasisa, who was an arahant, figured, "Well, I can just go for alms once a week, take the leftover rice, and dry it. That's a nice frugal way of living, and I don't have to go out for alms every day. Just eat the leftover rice from the days before." The Buddha found out about it and took him to task. He said, "This is not a wise course of action." The story doesn't explain what the Buddha's reasoning was, but if you look at the history of Buddhism, you see that down the line, in later centuries, when monks stopped going for alms, they created a rift in the Buddhist community at large. The monks lived on their own, they had their own kitchens, with monastery attendants to fix their food. Lay people basically stopped caring about the monks. And as a result, when the Muslims came into India and destroyed the monasteries, the lay people

didn't really care. The connection had been severed. The Buddha saw that far ahead. So even fully awakened arahants can't always assume that what they think is true. They've got to test it and check it, just like everybody else. So when insights arise in your meditation, or when you gain an intuitive feel for something, the question is not where the insight comes from, but what happens when you apply it. You view it as a hypothesis in an experiment.

You're developing an experimental intelligence here. You take the passages you read in the texts and you experiment with them. You take the insights you receive from meditation and you experiment with them. There's a passage in the very first sutta in the Digha Nikaya, listing all the different kinds of wrong views that people can develop, and not every wrong view comes from people simply thinking things out without having practiced meditation. A lot of wrong views come from people who meditate and gain some insights or intuitive knowledge, but the knowledge isn't as complete as they thought it was. So they jump to the wrong conclusions.

What this means is that whether the source of your insight is something you've learned from the texts, something you've thought out on your own, an intuitive feeling you have, or something that comes up in your meditation, you always have to test it to see: "If I adopt this, where does it go? What does it connect with? What are the connections here in terms of cause and effect?" That's how you test to see, in terms of the insights you gain, which ones are fool's gold and which ones are genuine gold. You put them to use and then see what happens. And you always adopt the heedful attitude that says, "I'm testing things here. I won't draw any firm conclusions until I've seen what actually works in freeing the mind." As the Buddha says, just because you like a particular truth or it seems to fit in with your worldview, that's no guarantee that it's actually true.

We've all read the Kalama Sutta, where the Buddha says not to take religious texts as being necessarily true. That's the part everybody seems to remember. The other part though, is that he also says not to take what you like as necessarily being true. Don't take what seems to fit into your worldview as true; don't take what seems to work out logically as necessarily being true. You've got to test things. When you adopt this or that idea, this or that practice, what happens? Check these things out not only against your own experience, but also against the experience of wise people. In this way, you're much more likely to find truths that really, really are true, because they've stood up to the test.

Of course this means we have to be very careful in how we conduct our tests, which again is why we work at developing concentration, developing mindfulness, all the mental attributes of patience, endurance, alertness, honesty, and discernment. They put us in a position where we can test things and evaluate the results reliably, so that we're not overcome by bias and we can overcome the limitations of the worldviews and ideas we bring to the practice.

After all, the purpose of the practice is to see things we've never seen before, to attain things we've never attained before. That means you have to learn how to overcome the limitations of your assumptions. And this is how you do it: You adopt this experimental way of developing intelligence, so that your heart's desire — a true happiness — will get fulfilled, even if it's not quite in the way you might have wanted it. After all, this does require work. But it's a path of work and of effort that leads ultimately to a happiness that, once you've attained it, doesn't require any effort to maintain. Only through gaining intelligence in terms of cause and effect can you find the happiness that ultimately lies beyond cause and effect.

So we work with the nitty-gritty of just learning to observe what's going on in the mind, testing it, learning to put away whatever assumptions don't pass the test — because only through working through the details like this do we ultimately break through to something much larger and more lasting.

Three Perceptions

August 21, 2007

Almost any book on Buddhism will tell you that the three characteristics — the characteristic of inconstancy, the characteristic of stress or suffering, and the characteristic of not-self — were one of the Buddha's most central teachings. The strange thing, though, is that when you look in the Pali Canon, the word for "three characteristics," *ti-lakkhana*, doesn't appear. If you do a search on any computerized version of the Canon and type in, say, the characteristic of inconstancy, *anicca-lakkhana*, it comes up with nothing. The word's not in the Pali Canon at all. The same with *dukkha-lakkhana* and *anatta-lakkhana*: Those compounds don't appear. This is not to say that the concepts of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta* don't occur in the Canon; just that they're not termed characteristics. They're not compounded with the word "characteristic." The words they *are* compounded with are perception, *sañña* — as in the perception of inconstancy, the perception of stress, and the perception of not-self — and the word *anupassana*, which means to contemplate or to keep track of something as it occurs. For instance, *aniccanupassana*, to contemplate inconstancy, means to look for inconstancy wherever it happens.

Now, it's true that you'll frequently find in the Canon the statements that all things compounded or fabricated are inconstant, that they're all stressful. And all dhammas — all objects of the mind — are not-self. So if that's the way things are, why not just say that these are characteristic features of these things? Why make a big deal about the language? Because words are like fingers, and you want to make sure they point in the right direction — especially when they're laying blame, the way these three perceptions do. And in our practice, the direction they point to is important for a number of reasons.

One is that the Buddha's concern is not with trying to give an analysis of the ultimate nature of things outside. He's more interested in seeing how the behavior of things affects our search for happiness. As he once said, all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering. The suffering is essentially an issue of the mind's searching for happiness in the wrong places, in the wrong way. We look

for a constant happiness in things that are inconstant. We look for happiness in things that are stressful and we look for “our” happiness in things that are not-self, that lie beyond our control. The three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self are focused on our psychology, on how we can recognize when we’re looking for happiness in the wrong way so that we can learn to look for happiness in the right places, in the right ways. The contemplation of these three themes, the use of these three perceptions, is aimed at finding happiness of a true and lasting sort.

So it’s good to keep reminding ourselves of this point, because our prime focus in the meditation should always be on the mind. We’re not trying to analyze things outside in and of themselves. We’re trying to see how the mind’s quest for happiness relates to the way things behave. You always want to keep your focus here, on the mind’s quest, even when you focus on the breath. When the breath gets more and more refined, with a sense of ease filling the body, you reach a stage where the mind and the breath seem to become unified and one. The mind and its functions become more and more prominent in the meditation, and the breath — as it grows more and more subtle — fades into the background. This is just as it should be, because the mind is the culprit; the breath isn’t the culprit. Things that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self: They’re not to blame. The problem is the way the mind looks to these things for happiness. Even when it looks for happiness in a relatively wise way, these issues are relevant.

As the Buddha said, the beginning of wisdom is when you go to people who’ve found true happiness and you ask them: “What should I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” Notice that: My. Long-term. Welfare and happiness. Those three categories are directly related to the three perceptions. The “my” is related to not-self; “long-term” is related to inconstancy; “welfare-and-happiness” is related to stress. The three perceptions act as ways of testing any happiness you find, to see if it measures up to the standards you’ve set. But they follow on the “what-should-I-do.” That has to come first.

In other words, as we look for happiness, we focus first on actions that don’t constitute ultimate happiness but can be used as the path: things like mindfulness, persistence, and concentration. At that stage, the Buddha doesn’t have us focus too much on these three characteristics. He has us focus primarily on the doing. As part of the doing, we hold on to other perceptions: the

perception of breath, say, or the perception of whatever our meditation object is. We make that prominent. And we try to push that perception into a state of solid concentration — which means that we're pushing it in the direction of making it constant and easeful, and getting it under our control.

In this way, we're actually fighting the three characteristics as we try to bring the mind into concentration. We push to see how far we can find a happiness based on conditioned things. One reason for this is that if you don't push at a truth until it pushes back, you won't know how strong it is. Another reason is that we're going to need that conditioned happiness, that sense of relatively solid wellbeing, to put ourselves in a position where we can look at things very carefully as they come to be. That phrase, "as they come to be," comes into play when we're no longer pushing. But we've got to push first.

So you keep working on your concentration in all your activities, trying to keep the mind as constantly still as possible no matter what the outside conditions may be. You create the conditions for stillness inside, a sense of ease inside, and try to maintain that stillness and ease in the face of all sorts of conditions around you. You learn to gain more skill, more control.

At this stage in the game, the issues of inconstancy, stress, and not-self apply primarily to the things that would distract you from your concentration. You try to see that no matter how attractive or alluring or interesting other topics might be, they don't measure up to concentration as a source for happiness. They're less constant, more stressful, less under your control. So you drop them in favor of the bliss of concentration. You keep this up, gaining these insights, until you've fully mastered concentration — which, as the Buddha once said, happens well after your first taste of the deathless.

This means that there's going to be a long period in which you're essentially working against the three characteristics, at least as far as your concentration is concerned. You'll use these three perceptions to analyze, say, any object of lust, anger, jealousy, or fear that would pull you out of concentration. These perceptions are relevant because they're ways of reminding yourself that you can't find true happiness in those objects. For the meantime, that's how you use the contemplation of these themes.

And again the focus is not so much on trying to get to the ultimate nature of these outside objects as it is on using the perception as an antidote for a tendency of the mind. After all, these perceptions are not intended to be a statement of the ultimate nature of things out there — for, when you think about

it, the ultimate nature of things out there is really not all that relevant an issue. We don't hang on to things because we think that they have an inherent nature, that they inherently exist or don't exist. We hang on to them because we think they're going to provide happiness that's worth whatever effort they involve. What the Buddha is pointing out is that they really don't provide that happiness. The happiness they do provide doesn't really measure up. It's not worth the cost.

So you apply these three contemplations to things outside of your concentration, and then watch to see where the mind resists. In other words, what does it refuse to see as inconstant, stressful, and not-self? When you can catch the mind resisting in this way, you've gained an insight into its attachments. You've found a spot where you need to dig down and question its resistance. What deluded fantasy is the mind trying to protect here? What attitude is it trying to hide from your scrutiny? In this way, the three contemplations keep coming back to the mind, as they highlight your attachments and tell you where you still have work to do.

You can also apply these three contemplations to the first stages of concentration when you want to go to deeper stages. When the mind is settled and quiet on a beginning level, is it as quiet as it could be? Or is there still some inconstancy there? If you see that any of the factors of your concentration are stressful or inconstant, you drop them, and that will take you to deeper stages of concentration.

Ultimately, as your attachments to things outside of the concentration drop away, you turn your attention more to applying these three perceptions to contemplating the concentration itself. As this contemplation gets more refined, you see that even the most stable level of concentration you can attain — the one that has formed your highest experience of pleasure and ease — is composed of five aggregates on a very subtle level, and even on this subtle level their behavior displays these three features all the time. You apply the three perceptions to them to pry away even your attachment to concentration. That's when you incline the mind to the deathless — and, as the texts say, that inclination can take you in either of two directions. One is to non-returning, where you delight in your taste of nibbana as a dhamma, as an object of the mind. The other is full arahantship, when you go beyond even that kind of delight.

It's precisely at this fork in the road where the analysis of *sabbe dhamma anatta* — all dhammas are not-self — applies: where you might see nibbana as a dhamma, as an object of the mind. As long as you perceive it in that way, there's

going to be attachment, there's going to be a dhamma to hold on to. So you have to learn how to overcome that attachment by applying the perception of not-self to the dhamma of the deathless. Then, the texts say, you let go of all dhammas, which allows you to see nibbana in another way — not as a dhamma, but as the abandoning of all dhammas. That's the ultimate. And at that point, these three perceptions lose their function. They've done their work, so you can put them aside. After all, they're conditioned phenomena. When you've put all dhammas aside, you put them aside, too. Arahants can continue using these perceptions as a pleasant abiding for the mind, to remind them of why they've got the ultimate happiness, but these perceptions are no longer needed in the task of bringing about release.

So remember: We're not here to arrive at the true nature of things in and of themselves, aside from seeing how their *behavior* makes them inadequate as sources for true happiness. The emphasis always points back to using the perceptions to counteract unskillful tendencies in the mind, because the issues of the mind are paramount.

Ajaan Fuang once had a student in Singapore who wrote him a letter describing how his meditation had reached the point where it was concerned solely with seeing the three characteristics in everything he encountered. Ajaan Fuang had me write in reply: "Don't focus on things outside. Keep looking back at the mind, to see what it is that keeps complaining that they're stressful, inconstant, and not self — because the fault lies not with the things: The fault lies with the mind that's looking for happiness in the wrong place."

So that's where your attention should always be focused: on the machinations of the mind. Use whatever perceptions and means of contemplation that can cut through the mind's unskillful habits, and apply them in a way that leads to the goal of the teachings: an unconditioned happiness where you can put all perceptions, skillful and unskillful, aside.

Disenchantment

October 19, 2007

We all practice for the sake of happiness, for a happiness that goes deeper than ordinary pleasures. But in coming to the practice we often bring assumptions about happiness — how it works, why we're unhappy, what we can do to be happier — assumptions that we're hardly even aware are assumptions because we assume them so strongly. We just take it for granted that they're true. And sometimes they get in the way.

Two of the most common assumptions are ones that get most in the way. The first is that we're unhappy because we can't accept the way things are; that the purpose of the practice is to learn more acceptance. In other words, we're essentially neurotic, as in that old distinction between neurosis and psychosis: The psychotic person thinks that two plus two equals five. The neurotic person knows that two plus two equals four, but hates them for it. Our problem is that we simply can't accept the way things are. If we could only learn how to accept that two plus two does equal four and it's perfectly fine, then we'd be happy. And so in that model, the purpose of the practice is to learn acceptance. But even Freud recognized that getting people past their neuroses would not solve the problem of happiness. As he said, it would simply lead them to the level of ordinary, everyday misery. And yet part of the common theory says, well, you have to learn how to accept that because that's just the way things are.

Another model is that we're unhappy because we have a sense of separateness. Inside we're divided. Outside we're separate from other people; we're separate from nature. All we need to learn is how to develop a sense of oneness, a sense of interconnectedness, and then we'll be happy. But that's not how the Buddha saw interconnectedness. He saw that the way things are interconnected in terms of cause and effect is actually a cause for suffering. And even a sense of oneness, he says, is inconstant. It contains a subtle sense of stress. If you cling to it, you're going to suffer. There's a passage in the Canon where he describes the highest form of oneness, which is the oneness or non-duality of consciousness, in which you have a sense of consciousness as a totality,

containing everything. Yet even that, he says, is inconstant, stressful, and not-self.

What these two ideas about happiness have in common is that the way things are out there is already a given, and we're simply on the receiving end of what's given, so we have to learn how to develop the proper attitude to what's already there: Accept and try to find oneness within the way things are. But the Buddha's take on things is different. Reality is only partly a given. We are also shapers of our reality. We have an active role in shaping every present moment that we experience.

Now, the present moment is not entirely plastic, entirely responsive to everything we want out of it. Some of it is formed by influences coming in from the past, but part of it comes from our intentions in the present moment. In this way we are both producers and consumers. We produce our suffering and then we consume our suffering. We produce our pleasures and we consume our pleasures. Understanding this point helps to open the road to a deeper happiness, because there is a happiness, the Buddha said, that is not produced and not consumed. It just simply is. But the way we keep feeding on the happiness we produce gets in the way.

So for him, the purpose of the meditation is not to celebrate oneness or to celebrate acceptance. It's to develop two very different kinds of emotions: disenchantment and dispassion. The Pali word for disenchantment, *nibbida*, also means distaste, disgust, or revulsion, which may sound strong, but it needs to be strong. It's an antidote to our strong attachment to feeding on things. That attachment, the Buddha said, is the essence of suffering. The word *upadana*, which means clinging, also means the act of eating, of taking sustenance. He says that upadana lies at the essence of suffering and stress. So what we need to learn is how to look at the things we feed on until we develop a strong sense that we don't want to feed on them any more.

Now to get to that point, the Buddha does have us develop a certain amount of acceptance and a certain sense of oneness. This is what the practice of concentration is all about. You start by focusing on one object, like the breath, and then you stay with it long enough that you start developing a sense of oneness with it. Your awareness of the breath and the breath itself seem to become one and the same thing. There's a sense of unification — *ekodi-bhava* — which the Buddha has us develop as much as possible. And he has us take that sense of oneness as far as it can go through the levels of concentration.

Why? Because he wants us to feed on that and then to start comparing this food with the other things we've been feeding on, to see that this is a much more refined pleasure, a more satisfying form of nourishment. The pleasure it gives is blameless: the pleasure that comes from just focusing your mind. The pleasures we get from things outside contain a certain amount of blame in that our taking pleasure means that other people, other animals, have to work, have to suffer in one way or another. An example is physical food. As we eat physical food, we gain pleasure, but to get that food to our plate or into our bowls requires a lot of work and sacrifice. So as the Buddha said, that's a pleasure that contains some blame. Or in Ajaan Lee's terms, it contains some kammic debts. Whereas the pleasure that comes simply from learning how to focus on your breath is not placing a burden on anyone, so it's a type of food for the mind that's really worth developing.

As you develop a sense of oneness with the food of concentration, you look at the other ways the mind has been feeding on things for its emotional pleasures and you realize that they're pretty miserable. The image the Buddha gives in the Canon is of a blind person who has been given a soiled, oily rag by someone who says, "Look. This is a nice, clean, white piece of cloth." The blind person takes the oily rag and gets very possessive of it, thinking that it's a nice, clean white piece of cloth. But when a doctor eventually cures the blind person of his blindness and he can start seeing, the first thing he looks at is his cloth. He realizes that it's not nice, clean, and white. It's a dirty and oily rag. He says, "Wow, I was really fooled by that guy."

In the same way, the Buddha says that once you attain the first taste of Awakening, you look back on your old pleasures and realize how you've been fooled by the mind — that in finding your pleasure, what you've been feeding on is just forms and feelings and perceptions and thought constructs and consciousness — which, when you really look at them very carefully, are not worth feeding on at all.

There's a story they tell about the American occupation of Japan after World War II. There were some cooks in Japanese restaurants who were really upset by the fact that they had lost the war, and now they had to prepare food for the occupiers. So, to get some revenge, they would take human excrement and prepare it with all kinds of wasabi or whatever to mask the taste, and then serve it to their American customers. They would feed the occupiers shit, basically, and the occupiers didn't know. So the cooks got their perverse pleasure that way. If

you look at what you've been taking as food for the mind, you realize that it's just the same sort of thing, that all the pleasure was in the preparation.

This is why we have the contemplation of the 32 parts of the body, the analysis of things in terms of the aggregates, in terms of the sense media, in terms of the properties: so we can realize that the food of lust or possessiveness we've been feeding on with regard to the body is really not based on much. It doesn't give us any real sustenance, and the pleasure we get out of it is certainly not worth all the effort that goes into dressing it up. The purpose of this contemplation is to gain that sense of *nibbida* — disenchantment or revulsion — with the food we've been consuming so that we won't want to eat it anymore.

When you decide you don't want to eat it, you turn around and look at the fact that you've been preparing this food all along, and you realize you don't want to prepare it any longer: That's dispassion. You've had a passion for creating this food out of form, feeling, whatever. That's why it was there as food. But once you gain a sense of dispassion for it, you stop creating it. And when you stop creating it, it's no longer there. That's when you experience cessation. The mind is no longer entangled either in the process of production or in the process of consumption. That's when it's freed. It opens to the happiness that's there when you're not so wound up or enthralled in production and consumption of all these miserable forms of food.

So the Buddha's take on true happiness is very different from a lot of the assumptions we tend to bring to the practice. It's important to keep this fact in mind. We're not totally on the receiving end of things. We're producers and consumers at the same time. And the producing and consuming of our ordinary pleasures — or even some of our more refined pleasures — is what's getting in the way of realizing a happiness that goes beyond all this, that's not dependent on being connected or unconnected. It's not dependent on accepting or not accepting. It's just there. But to find it we have to develop a sense of disconnect with our old enthrallments. And we have to decide not to accept the way things have been. In this way, the Buddha has a very different approach to how and where to find true happiness. But the happiness that comes is a lot truer than anything that can come from simply learning how to accept things or learning how to become one with them.

So try to keep this point in mind — that you're both a producer and a consumer — and take a good, hard look at what you've been producing and how you've been consuming it. Look at all the effort that goes into producing

happiness out of this body we have, out of feelings and perceptions and thought constructs and consciousness. Start asking yourself: Is it really worth all the effort? Maybe there's something better. Maybe it's time to grow up. When you can develop that sense of disenchantment and dispassion, it leads to cessation. Then you realize that cessation is not a scary thing. It's not like extinction. It's more like learning how to outgrow some old bad habits, your old addictions, your old intoxications, and finding that there's something a lot better there when you put your old feeding habits aside.

Becoming

July 23, 2007

Try to keep track of the breath. Don't think about the fact that you're going to be here for a whole hour. Just think about this breath, and then this breath, each breath, one breath at a time. Think about it and watch it, see what it does. What do you notice when it comes in; what do you notice when it goes out? What way of coming in feels best for the body; what way of letting it go out feels best for the body? The breath is called the fabricator of the body, or bodily fabrication — *kaya-sankhara* — both because the way you breathe has a huge impact on the way you experience your body, and because there's an intentional element in the breath. It's one of the few bodily processes that can be either voluntary or involuntary. So make the most of the fact that you can exert some voluntary control over it. You can choose when to breathe in; you can choose when to breathe out. Then it's a matter of learning the best reasons for choosing to breathe in or breathe out in any particular way.

Can you sense how the body tells you that now's a good time for an in-breath, now's a good time for an out-breath? It has its signals, you know. There are certain feelings in the body that you can learn to recognize over time, and you can explore how best to respond to them. Take their cue in such a way that it leads to a sense of fullness. For example, you can breathe in till the body feels full, and then you don't squeeze it out. Allow it to stay full. Even though the breath will go out, you can still maintain some sense of fullness. When the next breath comes in, add a little bit more fullness. The same with the next and the next. It builds up over time. Simply by approaching the breathing process in a particular way, you can create a state of ease, you can create a state of fullness — even a sense of fullness that's a bit too much. Sometimes people can begin to feel that they're going to drown in breath energy. You might want to temper that a little bit. But as long as the fullness feels refreshing and blissful, stick with it.

There was once a senior monk in Bangkok who was learning meditation from Ajaan Lee. He was well read and knew his Buddhist doctrine. After a while of practicing concentration, he complained to Ajaan Lee, "As we bring the mind to

concentration like this, aren't we developing states of becoming and birth?" *Bhava* and *jati* are the words he used. You may have noticed as we were chanting the Sutta on Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion just now: The craving that leads to further becoming is the craving that leads to suffering as well. The senior monk was reasoning from this point, saying that we should be trying to abandon states of becoming and birth, and yet here we are creating them. And Ajaan Lee said, "Precisely. That's what we're doing. If you want to understand becoming and birth, you have to consciously create these states. Create a state of wellbeing, create a state of fullness, get good at it. That's when you understand the process. Before you take things apart, you have to learn how to put them together."

And that's what we're doing right now, creating a state of becoming, a state of wellbeing or well-becoming. We do this both so that we can get good at creating it and so that, in the course of creating it, we can put the mind in a good spot where it can watch things more carefully, more clearly. When the mind is comfortable in the present moment, at ease in the present moment, it can stay firmly in the present moment and watch processes transparently as they come, as they go. You get a better sense of your raw materials.

The creating of a state of becoming in the mind like this is the kamma of your meditation, right here, right now. A lot of people believe that kamma is one of those teachings that's not particularly relevant to their meditation practice. But essentially, kamma is what the practice is all about. After all, kamma is what you're doing to create suffering. Changing your kamma is what's going to bring suffering to an end. The Buddha tends to avoid talking about metaphysical issues, but kamma is the one big metaphysical issue he talks about a lot. The nature of action, what action does, when it gives its results, the fact that action is real, that it gives results both immediately and over time: These are metaphysical issues. And the reason the Buddha focuses on these and not on other issues is because the nature of action is important for understanding why we suffer and how we can stop suffering. There's the kamma that leads to suffering; there's the kamma that leads to its end.

So we're here trying to understand what action is all about, what action does, and what it creates. And our state of concentration is Exhibit A, our primary example of action right here. We're creating a state of wellbeing. You can't let go of states of wellbeing until you learn how to make good ones. Ajaan Lee's example, when he was talking to that senior monk, was of having a chicken that lays eggs. Some of the eggs, he said, you can take apart and analyze; some of the

eggs you can eat. If you don't have anything to eat, you don't have the strength to take things apart and analyze them. We're feeding on the sense of ease that comes from the concentration because that gives us the strength to analyze things.

How do you analyze things? You take things apart in terms of what you're fabricating and of the raw materials with which you're fabricating them.

For example, we all know the teaching that you create a sense of self out of any of the five aggregates, all of which are activities. Well, you can watch yourself as you meditate: Exactly how do you create a sense of *me* or *mine* around what you're doing? One thing you tend to see very quickly is the way your sense of self gets involved as you watch yourself doing the meditation well or poorly. When things aren't going well, you think you're a hopeless meditator. You get all tied up in knots. When they're going well, you get complacent and think you're a great meditator. Either way, you set yourself up for trouble. But when you realize that this is the process of I-making and my-making in action, you learn to leave things at the level of the raw materials. You don't have to make an "I" out of them, just notice that there are feelings, perceptions, fabrications. As you watch these things even more carefully, you begin to realize that even these aggregates have an element of fabrication, an element of intention, in what you thought was their raw form.

As the Buddha says, we create form for the sake of form-ness. Your sense of the form of the body is something you fashion out of sensations so that you can breathe and move. You can create formless states as well. This is what you learn when you move from the fourth jhana into the four formless states: the infinitude of space, the infinitude of consciousness, nothingness, and neither perception nor non-perception. You realize that you do create a sense of form with regard to the body by the way you move the breath around. When the breath is very, very still, that sense of form begins to disintegrate, to dissolve away, and you have the choice of not applying the perception of form to the body. You become sensitive to the space that permeates between the atoms of sensation making up your sense of the body. All the places where you feel space in the body begin to connect and then they connect with the space outside.

It's as if you have a mist of atoms here. In order to breathe, you applied perceptions — i.e., mental labels — to that mass of mist; you had an image of the form of the body that allowed you to make it move. But when you don't have to move the body around — you don't even have to move the breath around —

everything grows very still and you can drop that sense of form if you want to. You can choose instead to focus on the perception of space permeating the mist. That's when you experience the infinitude of that space — and at that point you begin to realize that even the perception of form or the experience of form contains an element of intention. You then begin to see this process in relation to the formless realms as well: When you drop the perception of space, you're left with a perception of "knowing." That's how you move from a sense of the infinitude of space to the infinitude of consciousness. These experiences can be willed, and the fact that they're so subtle allows the willing to be transparent.

What you're doing is to take your experience apart, layer by layer, seeing where the different levels of intention get involved and learning how to drop them. As you progressively do away with these layers of intention, you get down to what the Buddha calls knowledge of things as they have come to be. As he said, only when he had gained knowledge of things as they have come to be — in terms of the four noble truths, and the three levels of knowledge about each truth — did he claim full Awakening. That's the kind of knowledge we're working our way down to. And the only way you can get down to that level of unintended, unshaped, unfabricated experience, getting down to the absolutely rawest of the raw materials of the present moment, is first by consciously putting them together into something. Otherwise, you miss a lot of subtleties.

Sometimes you hear people say: "Try to sit with things simply as they are, right from the very beginning of the meditation, and you can get into a state of equanimity or pure mindfulness. And then you realize that that equanimity is unfabricated. Equanimity and mindfulness: That's it, that's the unfabricated." But that's not the case at all. Equanimity and mindfulness, when they're pure, constitute the fourth jhana, not the unfabricated. There's an element of fabrication in mindfulness; there's even an element of fabrication in equanimity. But unless you learn consciously how to fabricate mindfulness and equanimity for long periods of time and then how to observe them, you won't notice this. This is why you have to build up these states of concentration before you can start taking them apart.

There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about the issue of thirsting for becoming, thirsting for non-becoming, and seeing things as they have come to be. He starts out with two extremes: There are people who just love becoming this, becoming that, creating states of being as much as they can; and there are other people who want to destroy states of being. They've gotten sick of what

they've done in terms of creating their world and their experiences, and they just want to destroy the whole thing. The Buddha says that neither extreme is proper. In creating things, you just create more suffering. That point is obvious. But in destroying these things, you create a different kind of state of becoming, the process of searching for non-becoming. That, he says, simply leads to more becoming. You take on the identity of the destroyer, the annihilator. The trick is to see simply what has come to be, i.e., to see the raw materials you've been shaping into the present simply as that — as raw materials — and then learn to develop dispassion for them.

It's as if you've been building houses with what you thought were bricks. But if you look carefully at the bricks, you realize that they're actually frozen meat. Of course any house built out of frozen meat, as it gets exposed to the heat, is going to turn into a big pile of rotting flesh. When you realize that, you develop dispassion for the activity of building houses; you develop dispassion for the raw materials. That's when you let go. You don't have to destroy the houses. They disintegrate on their own. The issue here is learning to see the raw materials simply as they are, as something that's come into being through your past kamma. And no matter how skillful you are at building an elaborate house with lots of gingerbread and balconies and whatever, it's still frozen meat and it's going to thaw.

So when you develop dispassion for what's come to be, you find true freedom. You stop this process of fabricating, building, creating states of being. You don't have to destroy the states of being. Simply the fact that you've stopped creating them, stopped clinging to them, lets them fall away on their own. And your dispassion means that you won't replace them with new ones.

It's a subtle skill, which means that you can't go straight to the letting go. First you've got to learn how to build properly. Only then can you see the subtleties of the intentions in the mind and, at the same time, get a felt sense for your raw materials. Otherwise you hold to the intention of being equanimous, and think that that's it. Or to the intention of being totally passive, nonreactive, and think that that's it — without seeing that that, too, is an intention; that, too, has an element of will that keeps it going.

So try to be as skillful as you can in staying with the breath, in creating a sense of wellbeing through the breathing, because it teaches you a lot of important lessons about the element of kamma, the element of will and fabrication that goes into the present moment. It teaches you about the raw

materials and the many levels of intention there within them. You take these raw materials and turn them into a transparent state that allows you to watch these processes in action, so that someday you, too, can reach that point where, after putting things together, you can take them apart, see things simply as they come into being, develop dispassion for them, and drop them. That way you can test for yourself: When the Buddha said that there is an unfabricated, is what he said really true?

It may seem like we're going in the opposite direction as we fabricate concentration here, but the only way you're going to see what's unfabricated is if you're totally sensitive to every level of fabrication possible. So although we're creating a state of becoming here with the breath — a state of wellbeing, a state of rapture, ease, unification of mind — as Ajaan Lee says, you're going to need to eat some of these eggs. You can't take them all apart; you can't destroy all of them. You've got to eat some of them in order to keep going. So feed yourself well.

Beyond Nature

August 8, 2007

It's good to come back to a place like this where you can hear the crickets chirping in the evening, the sound of the doves in the late afternoon. There's something in the body and the mind that responds to being out in nature like this. The mind gets the chance to settle down, to put aside a lot of its cares. And for those of you who've been living in the city, cut off from nature, there's often the thought that if only you could get back to nature and stay there, that would solve all your problems. But go ask people who live in nature all the time, and they can tell you a long list of problems they still suffer from, living out in nature.

Think about human history as a whole. The times when people get really romantic about nature are the times when they don't have to live in it. The idea of romanticizing wilderness didn't come into force in America until the frontier had been closed, and nature had been tamed to some extent — to the extent that human beings can tame nature. It's important to keep this in mind as we practice. Coming out here doesn't solve all your problems. What it does is that it gives you a place to practice, so you can look deeper into where the real problems are.

When the Buddha talked about how conditions cause suffering, he wasn't talking just about your social conditioning. He was talking about conditions of nature. That chant we had just now — “the world is swept away” — doesn't refer just to the human social world or your psychological world. It also refers to the world as a whole. Everything in nature is marked with inconstancy, stress, things that lie beyond your control. This applies not only to human beings but also to animals of every kind.

You sometimes hear people romanticizing the mental life of animals, that they don't suffer because they don't have a sense of self. That's not the case. Animals often suffer more than we do. They live in constant fear, with no real understanding of what's going on around them. All they know is that they're hungry all the time, yet the need to go out and search for food forces them to place themselves in danger.

And you can read the writings of the forest monks: They certainly don't romanticize nature. Even Ajaan Lee, when he talks about the advantages of living in the forest and the lessons you learn there, doesn't talk about how nice it is to get back and be one with nature. His focus is more on how nature is a dangerous place where you have to learn to be heedful all the time.

We don't suffer only because of our social conditioning. We suffer because we live in a world of inter-eating, where beings are constantly feeding on one another. We have this inner desire, this inner need to survive, to feed. To create, to keep these worlds that they call *bhava* — our emotional worlds, our mental worlds, and the physical world we live in — to keep our experience of these worlds going, to survive, requires that we feed on one another, emotionally, mentally, physically. And there's suffering not only in being eaten, but also in having to eat.

So the conditions the Buddha's talking about are not just social conditions. We don't suffer only because we're neurotic about our cravings. Craving in itself is a cause of suffering. It's also the cause of continued being and becoming. This is how nature keeps going: Animals crave. People crave. This is how we keep going, this is how we survive, this is how we die, how we get reborn.

So the ways of nature are not an ideal to which we're trying to return. They exemplify the problem, which is that as long as you have to feed, there's going to be suffering. As long as your happiness depends on conditions of any kind, there's going to be suffering and stress. The advantage of coming to a place like this is that you get to look deep inside the mind to see where the wellsprings of these cravings come from, this process of fabrication that lies deep within the mind.

As we meditate, we're trying to study fabrication as we experience it. This is the conditioning process in the mind and in the body. The basic fabrication in terms of the body is the breath. And as for the mind, there are two types of fabrication: verbal and mental. Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation. These are the processes with which you put sentences together in the mind. You focus on a topic and then you make comments about it. That conditions the mind. Then there's purely mental fabrication, which is feeling and perception, "perception" here meaning the labels you apply to things, while "feeling" means the different feeling-tones of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain.

Normally, the way we put these things together causes stress and suffering. If you do this with ignorance, you suffer. If you can learn how to do it with knowledge, you can turn these processes of fabrication into the path. This doesn't mean that when you're on the path you don't suffer. It's simply a different type of suffering. It's a suffering that leads to the end of suffering, the kamma that leads to the end of kamma. There's still going to be a subtle level of suffering in the breath even when you're concentrated on it. The breath can get very subtle and very pleasant, even rapturous, but there's still an element of stress there. But for the time being, you're going to use that as a path.

In fact, you put all three types of fabrication together to get the mind into concentration. You think about the breath — that's directed thought — and you evaluate the breath. You explore to see which ways of perceiving the breath help in the process of making it feel more comfortable, so you've got perception and feeling there as well.

In this way you're taking the process of fabrication and turning it into a path to the end of fabrication. As you do this, you begin to see how much your intentions really do shape these things. The Buddha's picture of your experience is not that you're simply a passive observer of things, commenting on them. In other words, it's not like watching a TV show. The TV show is a given, and you simply like it or dislike it or you're neutral about it. That's all. But that's not the Buddha's picture of experience. He says that you're actively engaged in shaping your experience all the time. In fact, the extent to which your intentions are shaping your experience goes a lot deeper and is a lot more radical than you might imagine. This is one of the insights of Awakening: how much your present intentions are needed for you to experience even the present moment. As the Buddha points out, all of the aggregates — form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness — have an element of intention in them.

There are lots of different potentials from your past kamma that you can focus on in any given moment. Your choice of what to focus on is going to determine what you experience. For instance, there are potentials for different kinds of feelings. There are places in the body that, if you focused on them, could get you really tied up in anguish or pain. You could take the germs of a pain and build them into something really overwhelming. There are other places in the body where there's a potential for pleasure. If you learn how to focus there, you can develop a strong sense of refreshment, rapture, wellbeing. Then you can let that pleasure and refreshment permeate and fill the body in the same way that

the cool water in a spring coming from the bottom of a lake can fill the whole lake with its coolness.

So you have the choice of what you're going to focus on now — which sensations in the body help create a sense of wellbeing, which ones could create a sense of dis-ease, what you're going to think about, what you're going to focus on. Those are choices you make all the time. You take these potentials and turn them into an actual experience. When you realize how you do this, you can learn how to make your choices more skillfully.

This is the advantage of coming out into a relatively natural place like this. It's not totally natural. If we turned off the water, the avocado trees would die and the chaparral would take over. There wouldn't be any shade during the day. So even here in the orchard it's not totally natural. But at least there's enough peace and quiet for you to look into the mind and see that the source of trouble is not your social conditioning as much as it's just the plain old fact of conditioning or fabrication — this process of becoming, which is fed by craving. When you hear those crickets cricketing out there, they're not doing it in total pleasure and joy. They're hungry. When you watch the animals around in the orchard, you see that they're hungry. They have to be wary as they venture out for food.

As a meditator, you have to be wary as well. Even when you create good states of concentration, that's still a type of becoming. It still depends on causes and conditions. At least it puts the mind in a position where it can observe the process of becoming and dig deeper, to watch the conditioning, to see how it happens — and ultimately to dig down to an area where there's no conditioning any more, which is something that stands outside of nature as we know it.

It's not the case that the conditioned comes from the unconditioned. The way the Buddha explained causality is that causes and effects influence each other. An effect turns around and has an influence on its cause. So there's no prime mover or first cause or ground of being in the Buddha's teachings at all, for every cause can get shaped by its effects. And if anybody had been qualified to talk about Buddha nature, the Buddha would have been the one. But he never talked about Buddha nature at all, never said that Buddha nature was the ground of being. He simply noted that there are causes and conditions that affect one another.

So if something is going to be unconditioned, it has to lie outside of the causal process entirely — something that's already there, but as long as you're entangled in fabrication you're not going to see it. The only way you can see it is

if you turn the fabrication in the direction of the path, so that the way you breathe, the way you think, and the way you feel and perceive things is conditioned not by ignorance, but by knowledge, by awareness — in particular, awareness of which activities cause stress and which activities don't. That kind of awareness you develop gradually. It's a skill you work on as you get more and more sensitive both to the process of fabrication and to the stress that it causes even at very subtle levels. Ultimately, you bring the mind to the point where you realize that no matter which direction you fabricate, which direction you intend, there's going to be stress. If your discernment is sharp, you drop all intention at that point. That's when the mind opens up to this other dimension, which is totally separate.

So it's not the case that we're returning to a place we've come from. After all, as the Buddha points out, even little babies have their greed, anger, and delusion. It's just that their faculties and bodies aren't strong enough to act on those defilements very powerfully. But they suffer powerfully: You can see that very clearly. As soon as a child comes out of the womb, it cries. A lot of the child's early life is spent in crying because it has all sorts of desires and yet can't fulfill them. It has all sorts of pains but doesn't know what to do about them. So we're not trying to return to that state or to a state of nature like an animal. We're trying to find something that goes beyond nature as we know it. After all, if we were simply returning to a state where we were before, what's to prevent us from coming back out of that state again? If we could forget our true wonderful nature, was it really all that wonderful or true? And what would prevent us from forgetting it again?

So instead of returning to something old, we look at this process of fabrication that's going on all the time to see if we can learn something new about it. Learn how to understand it, learn how to take it apart, use it as a path. Learn how, once it's taken you as far as it can take you, you can let it go. That, as the Buddha said, allows us to see something we've never seen before: to attain the as yet unattained, to realize the as yet unrealized. In other words, we're heading into totally new territory.

Keep that in mind as you practice. You can create wonderful luminous states in the mind, but remember that those, too, are fabricated. No matter what comes up in the practice, always learn how to familiarize yourself with it. And then learn to look for where there's still a level of inconstancy and stress in here — because that perception of stress and inconstancy will be your way out.

Glossary

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor.

Arahant: A person who has abandoned all ten of the fetters that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth, whose heart is free of mental defilement, and is thus not destined for future rebirth. An epithet for the Buddha and the highest level of his Noble Disciples. Sanskrit form: *arhat*.

Brahma-vihara: Sublime attitude of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity.

Buddho: A meditation word meaning “awake.”

Dhamma: (1) Event; action. (2) A phenomenon in and of itself. (3) Mental quality. (4) Doctrine, teaching. (5) Nibbana (although there are passages in the Pali Canon describing nibbana as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *dharma*.

Dhammapada: A collection of short verses attributed to the Buddha.

Digha Nikaya: The Long Collection, the first section of discourses in the Pali Canon.

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*.

Kathina: A gift of cloth and other requisites made to the monks at the end of the Rains Retreat.

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.

Samvega: A sense of dismay, terror, or urgency.

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*.

Sutta Nipata: A collection of longer poems attributed to the Buddha.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline.

Vipassana: Insight.

Wat (Thai): Monastery.