



*ePublished
Dhamma Talks*

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ePublished Dhamma Talks

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by

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Anchored by Skillful Roots

March, 2003

From all accounts, the world is going to go through a bad period: war, economic problems, insecurity of all kinds. Of course we've never really been all that secure. But apparently our insecurity is going to become much more obvious. It's like a big storm coming through. When you know a storm is coming through, you've got to do what you can to hunker down, to withstand it, so that you don't get blown away and the things around you don't come crashing down on top of you. In a similar way, when life doesn't go as you like, it's like a storm coming onto the mind, and you need to develop your powers of resilience. If you compare your mind to a tree, you want to have deep roots, widespread roots, healthy roots, the kinds of roots that will keep the tree from getting blown over and killed.

Traditionally, the Buddha talked about roots for the mind. There are unskillful roots and skillful roots. The unskillful roots are greed, anger, and delusion. The skillful ones are lack of greed, lack of anger, lack of delusion. Unskillful roots are like rotten roots. They don't hold your tree up and they don't give you much nourishment. So those are not the roots you want to depend on. The roots you want to send out are roots based on lack of greed, lack of anger, lack of delusion. There is a phrase Ajaan Lee quotes—I don't know where it comes from, I haven't found it in the Canon yet; maybe it's from the commentaries, but it makes sense: He says, generosity nourishes the roots of lack of greed, precepts nourish the roots of lack of anger, meditation nourishes the roots of lack of delusion.

These are the activities that we have to engage in order to prepare, in order to withstand the storm—not just before the storm hits, but all the way throughout the storm. Being generous, observing the precepts, and meditating keep us strong, keep us from getting blown away. If your survival is accomplished without generosity, without virtue, without meditation, it's not worth much. It's not the sort of survival that keeps you healthy and well-nourished. You look at survivors of war, who had to go and kill and steal and cheat and bomb, and then go into a lot of denial about it. Look at all the veterans of past wars, emotionally scarred for life. They did survive, but at a huge cost, the cost of the skillful roots in the mind. It's by nourishing the skillful roots that the health of the mind survives. Even if we have to leave this particular body, at least the mind has the potential for sending out skillful roots wherever it finds itself the next time

around. It's nourished with its inner sense of well-being, truthfulness, self-honesty. You look at your behavior and there's nothing you have to hide from yourself. That's important. At the same time, when you reflect on your behavior, you realize you've been helpful to other people. Practicing generosity is like sending good roots out, spreading abroad in all directions, so that your survival is not just for your own sake, but it helps other people well.

The same with the precepts: If you're very selective about who you'll treat kindly and who you won't treat kindly, or there are circumstances under which you're going to hold by the precepts, and other circumstances under which you're *not* going to hold by the precepts, your roots cover a very limited range. But if you decide that under no circumstances are you going to break the five precepts, the Buddha says that you're giving unlimited safety to unlimited numbers of beings. In return you get a share in that unlimited safety as well. So again your survival is not just a selfish thing. It's not based on the kind of roots that are going to rot or dry out, or get pulled up easily, get blown away. These are healthy roots that spread out and keep you secure in the storm.

As for the deep roots you need, those come from meditation. These are the roots that grow deep down in the mind. It's through the meditation that you realize how your true happiness doesn't have to depend on situations outside because you've found a source inside. Your tap root has gotten down that far. It's tapped into something special. It's like the water in earthquake faults. A friend who has done a study has found out that there's water in earthquake faults, and it doesn't depend on rainfall at all. It seems to be coming up from the fault itself; maybe it's a result of a chemical reaction—Who knows?—but it's a type of water that's independent of rainfall. If you can tap into that, you've got a good source of water that doesn't depend on the vagaries of the climate.

Similarly with meditation: When you've got a taproot that goes way down into the mind—in terms of concentration, in terms of discernment—you find a source inside that's nourishing. That's the source that can feed your need for happiness so that it doesn't have to depend on anything else.

In other words, your goodness doesn't have to depend on outside conditions. When that's the case, it's a goodness you can trust. After all, outside conditions are always changing. If there isn't a war here, there's a war someplace else. If there are not economic problems here, there are economic problems someplace else. If they are not in this house, they're in somebody else's house. And then they come back here again. Back and forth like that. If our goodness depends on these things, it's a goodness we can't trust. Other people can't trust us; we can't trust ourselves.

That's probably one of the scariest things in life: to realize that you can't trust yourself. You would like to look at yourself and say, "I'm the sort of person who

can be depended on to do the right thing regardless of the circumstances. But then when circumstances get really challenging, you find suddenly that you can't depend on yourself in that way. That's very unsettling, very unnerving, because if you can't depend on yourself, who can you depend on?

So you've got to dig down inside with the meditation and find that source of nourishment that doesn't depend on the rainfall, doesn't depend on the vagaries of the outside world: that inner source of happiness that comes as you take your attachments apart. You sit here focusing on the breath, and learn to pry the mind away from the distracting thoughts that fly off in all directions. You sit here learning how not to get involved in them, in the worlds of that the mind creates, that pull it here, pull it there.

Then, as the mind finally settles down, you find that it's like an onion: There are layers and layers and layers to its concentration. You peel them away, one by one. You don't have to be in a great hurry to do this. Many people have a problem that. Once the mind begins to settle down, they're in a hurry to know, "Okay, what's the next step?" Well, the next step is staying right where you are, getting really used to that, getting well settled there. Because it's through this habit of getting well settled that the mind can begin to relax into the breath even more deeply, so that it's not always tensed and ready to jump. You can gain a greater and greater sense of reliance on what's here inside.

As you settle in here, the superficial layers of the onion begin to fall away. You get to deeper ones, and deeper ones, not because you're jumping from one spot to another, but because you're really staying right here, getting more and more solid right here. Then, after a while, there comes a point where the activities of thinking about the breath, adjusting the breath, and evaluating the breath, can be put aside because the breath has gotten as good as it can be. As Ajaan Fuang once said, it's like putting water into a water jar. You put it in bit by bit, but there comes a point where you can't add anymore to it. It's as much as the jar can hold. If you keep putting more water into it, it just spills out over the edge. That's the point where we can let go of the evaluation, because it's no longer needed, and we can just be one with the breath.

From there you work deeper and deeper, just by staying here, and settling in with more and more solidly. Have a sense of breath energy filling the body, so that every nerve is involved in the breathing process and they're all working together, from the central nerves out to the tips of the nerves. The whole body is saturated with the breath energy, so that the pores open up. All the oxygen you need is coming in and out through pores. Your brain is using less and less oxygen all the time, so the need to keep pumping things in and out gets less and less. That way you eventually get to the point where the breath can stop.

When the breath stops, you can see the mind clearly, because the movements

of the mind become more obvious. Before, the movement of the breath was getting in the way; you couldn't see the movements of the mind, because the breath was so much more obvious. It's like static when you're tuning in to a radio station. It's like a background hum in the room that keeps you from hearing any subtler sounds, because the hum is always there. But once the breath can settle down and be still like this, then the movements of the mind become very obvious. You can start peeling them away as well. You get deeper and deeper inside, until ultimately you find, after the final peeling away—of the peeler—that's when things open up to a new dimension.

The tap root has hit something that's totally different from anything else it has been feeding off before. But even if you don't get that far, the sense of ease that comes from a concentrated mind, if you tend to it well, can give you the nourishment you need. So if the wind blows outside, when the rain falls, when storms come, when the earth quakes under your feet, you've got something deeper than that, something more solid than that, and that's the basis for the goodness of the mind, the well-being of the mind, something you can depend on.

Your roots are deep, your roots are spread wide, and they're healthy roots, nourishing roots. Those are the roots that enable you to weather the storm, because the worst thing that can get blown away is the goodness in the mind, the well-being of the mind. It doesn't require outside events for it to get blown away. Your own inner choices to nourish unskillful roots or to cut your good roots: Those are the things that destroy you, even more than the death of the body.

So have a very clear sense of where your true roots are, the roots that are going to keep you firmly anchored. The roots that are going to continue to nourish you no matter what the windstorms are. The roots that make it worthwhile to survive, to keep going. Survival in the sense of the goodness of the mind: That's your primary survival. As the Buddha said, the heedful never die. The goodness in the mind never dies. People who are heedless, who don't look after the proper roots, the skillful roots: Those are the ones who are already dead.

So when you have a clear sense of what it means to survive in the true sense, and what the roots are that are going to keep it possible to survive, then it's a lot easier to hold on. We always talk about the practice as one of letting go, letting go. Well, you do let go of the unskillful roots, you let go of the things that would come crashing into you from wind and pull you away. You let go of those things. But you hold on to your skillful roots, because they keep this vital connection to your inner nourishment going. Holding on in this sense is what keeps you alive.

Limitless Thoughts

December 20, 2003

Every evening before the meditation, we have that chant of goodwill: goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for the people around us. But it's not just a chant. We're trying to develop the attitude that goes along with the chant, really wishing for your own true happiness, wishing for the true happiness of the people around us. Because this is one of those thoughts that doesn't need to have a limit. However much true happiness you gain, you're not taking anything else away from anyone else. However much they gain, they're not taking anything away from you. It's good to be able to put the mind in an unlimited state by thinking of unlimited things like that.

The Buddha talks about greed, anger, and delusion as things that make a limit. *Pamana-karana* is the Pali term. As long as we allow greed, anger, and delusion to hold sway over our minds, we're limiting ourselves. Then there's a whole question of self identification: That too is a limit. The Buddha says that whatever you identify as your self, that's a limit on you. If you identify with your body, you're suddenly limited to your body. If you identify with your feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness, you're limited by those things as well.

So as we're meditating, we're trying to strip away the limitations we place on ourselves, for those limitations are much more confining than the ones that other people place on us. We counteract these limits with limitless thoughts, starting with thoughts of good will or any of what they call the sublime abidings or limitless attainments. In other words, while your mind is dwelling on the idea of goodwill for yourself, goodwill for other people, you're not creating any opening for the limitations of greed or anger to come in to the mind. That way you help to open things up, open up the windows in your head, let the air come in.

That puts you in the right frame of mind for meditation, focusing on the breath. After all, why are you here just watching your breath coming in and going out, when you could be doing so many other things? It's because you want true happiness. You've seen the happiness of other things that the world has to offer, and it's not much. It comes and goes. Ajaan Suwat often liked to ask: The sensual pleasures you had last year, where are they now? They're gone. And what have they left behind? They've left behind a few memories. Sometimes they haven't left even that much behind. There's so much you forget. And of the things you do remember, what kind of memories are they? Either you miss those

things and wish they could come back again, or you think of what you had to do in order to get those things, and sometimes there's regret involved in thinking of those things as well. A bad aftertaste. So you as you reflect on this, you realize that that's not the direction you want to go if you want true happiness.

Psychologists talk about how human beings really tend to forget around the issue of happiness. They've looked someplace for happiness, they didn't find it, but then they go back there and look again, they go back and look again, as if somehow it'll spring up. It's like the story about the man who was eating a whole bushel of peppers and crying. People asked, "Why you are crying?" "Because they're so hot." "Then why are you eating the peppers if they are hot?" "I'm looking for sweet one." That's the way sensual pleasures are in life. You keep hoping that a sweet one will come along, one that will last, looking in the same places where you've found nothing but fleeting pleasures before. You forget that what determines the pain and pleasure in the mind, the stress and ease in the mind, the sorrow and happiness in the mind, comes from our actions. It doesn't come from things.

So as we're meditating, we're learning how to focus on our actions to see what we're doing, to see where there are slips in our awareness, lapses in our mindfulness that allow us to do things that are not in our best interest. This is why meditation focuses so much on developing continual mindfulness and alertness. These are the two most helpful qualities in the mind. And they're very basic: Mindfulness simply means keeping something in mind. That's a basic, basic skill. Alertness means noticing what you're going, and what's happening around you. We already have these qualities to a certain extent, but we've never fully developed them to see how far they can take us.

So as we're meditating, that's what we're doing: developing these two most helpful qualities in our mind. Keep the breath in mind and watch the breath, be sensitive to the breath. The more sensitive you are, the more you'll see, not only in terms of the breath, but also in terms of the mind. Because alert sensitivity requires being fully present, and also being very open to noticing what's coming in through your nerve endings. Think of all the nerves in your body opening up. Keep that picture in mind for a little while. Throughout the brain and all the way down to the feet, down the shoulders and arms, out to the hands: Think of your whole nervous system opening up. Then notice what you sense in terms of the breath, how the process of breathing feels.

In order to do that, you have to be fully present. In being fully present, you bring all of the mind along with you. When you're not really paying that much attention to the present moment, there are lots of little hidden corners where other things are going on, and they fragment your attention. But the more fully you can immerse yourself in the present moment, the less room there is for those

hidden corners. This is why being fully sensitive to the breath also allows you to be more and more sensitive to the mind. The mind becomes more fully here so that you can observe it, so that you begin to watch it in action.

The Buddha's approach to dealing with the problems in the mind is not so much tracing things back to what you did as a child, as they do in psychotherapy. He has you focus more on looking at your habits right now, as they keep coming back again and again and again. You don't have to ask, "What happened when I was a child, why did this happen?" You just have to look at what you're doing, to see the unnecessary suffering you're causing yourself. Or you can keep an eye out for any lack of openness and honesty in the mind: What's that doing to the mind? Do you want to do that? Do you continue wanting to do that as you see the stress that it's causing?

Sometimes this may seem threatening, opening up these hidden boxes, but as you're dealing with the breath, working with the breath, making it comfortable, you're also developing an attitude of gentleness, being gentle with the breath, not forcing it too much, just allowing it to feel really good. And that gentleness, as Ajaan Suwat used to say, is a paradoxical gentleness. The gentler you are with the breath, the more solid the mind gets. The more solid the mind is, the more you can really look into what's going on, with a gentleness that doesn't scare these things away, and a solidity that doesn't get swayed by them. That way you don't have to be afraid of the things that get dug up. You don't have to deal in denial. You can acknowledge, yes, there is that the mind. If it's something you can deal with right now, you do it. If you realize you're not up for that yet, well at least you know it's there. You can be confident that as you develop the meditation, you'll eventually develop the skills to deal with whatever comes up.

So watching the breath is a simple exercise, but it does a lot of good things for the mind. It puts the mind in a really good place, so that we can see what you're doing. We get into the present moment not because the present moment is a wonderful moment; after all, a lot of things that happen in the present are not wonderful at all. But the present moment is an important moment, because it's where we're making decisions that shape our life. Decisions that were made in the past are things you can't change anymore. They are done. Decisions that you're going to make in the future will depend a lot on what you're doing right now. So this is the most important place to be.

The world tells us that things other people are doing on the other side of the world are the most important thing going on. But you don't have to believe that, because your world is being shaped by your actions right now. You want to understand this process of acting. What does it mean for the mind to act? What's the difference between a simple event in the mind, the appearance of a feeling, and an action, the intention? How are intentions formed? What goes into that

process? What kind of perceptions, what kind of questions do you ask yourself? What kind of contact in the mind and the body forces your decisions?

Often you'll catch yourself doing something, and you'll say, "Wait a minute, what did that come from?" The decision seemed to be made by itself, and little tiny things triggered it. That's what you've got to look into, so that you can be more sensitive and actually see the trigger. Often the trigger, on closer inspection, won't seem worth it. Why on earth did that trigger spark that intention, spark that action? This is probably one of the scariest things about our own minds: Our minds are shaping our lives, and yet we don't know how and why they're doing it.

As meditators, we're putting ourselves in a better position to see the how and to see the why, and get more control over what those actions are. But before you can see the movements of the mind, you have to be very still. This is how we get the mind into that stillness: focusing on the breath, being mindful of the breath, being alert to the breath. Try to immerse yourself in the breath as much as you can in the present moment. The more immersed you are, the more difficult it is to pull away and start wondering about someplace else. So allow yourself to be immersed totally in the body right here right now: breath coming in, breath going out, whole body breathing in, whole body breathing out. Aware of the whole body, the whole nervous system opening up, all your blood vessels, all the little tiny, tiny muscles in your blood vessels: allowed them relax so that the breath energy has a free rein to flow anywhere in the body at all.

This is a very immediate way of showing goodwill to yourself, because it's both a good place to stay and it's a process of developing the mindfulness and alertness you're going to need to learn even more as the meditation progresses.

Trustworthy Judgment

March 8, 2006

One of the basic principles of the practice is that we take refuge. Formally this is called taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. This is why we have those chants about the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha every evening, to keep our refuge in mind. We think of them, we think of the Buddha's life, the lives of the members of the noble Sangha. We think of their qualities. And it's not so much that we take refuge in people way in the past. We take their qualities and try to develop them in ourselves right now. The Buddha was wise, so we try to develop our own wisdom. The Buddha was pure in his behavior, so we try to develop purity in ours. The Buddha was compassionate, wanting true happiness for himself, true happiness for all living beings, so we try to develop compassion as well, for ourselves and for the people around us. Only when we've developed these qualities in our minds do we really have a refuge. Because there's another principle in the teachings: that you have to be your own refuge, your own mainstay. The only way you can do this is by developing reliable qualities in your mind.

Most people can't really depend on themselves. They say they want happiness and then they turn around and do all kinds of things to cause misery. They want peace but they create war. They want the world to be a good place to live in, and yet they make a mess of it. This is called being a traitor to yourself. And yet that's the way most people live, because they haven't trained their minds. It's only when you train the mind that you can learn to depend on it.

It's like training an animal. If you have an untrained dog in your house, it causes a lot of problems. It's going to pee on the rug and create messes all through the house. You tell it to come, and it doesn't pay any attention. You tell it to go sit, go to bed or whatever, it doesn't any attention at all because it's not trained. Well, the mind that's not trained creates a lot more problems than a dog. It can mess up your whole life, not just your house. You suddenly get a notion in your head this might be good, that might be good, and without really looking at it carefully, just because it feels right or you have a hunch, you can run with it. In this way the mind ends up being a traitor to itself. It can't depend on itself because it doesn't know how to test its ideas. It doesn't know how to test its notions.

As we practice meditation we're trying to make the mind more reliable, more trustworthy. Just this simple process of focusing on one object: Can you do it for

a whole hour? You make up your mind to stay with the breath, and two breaths later another mind has taken over, wants to think about this problem or that. Sometimes the problems are big and important problems, but how can you trust the solutions you come up with if the mind can't even stay with one object for a while?

So this is basic training in learning how to be more reliable, how to be more trustworthy, so that you can trust yourself. To begin with, just stay with the breath. If you find the mind wandering off, just bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it right back, again. The same as with a little puppy: You tell the puppy to come, and if the puppy doesn't come, you have to pull the leash. The next time you say, "Come," and it doesn't come, you pull the leash again. After a while, the puppy gets the idea, not only because you pull the leash but also because you have a reward for it. When it comes, you give it a little piece of food. It's the same way with the breath. You try to make the breath as comfortable as possible, so that when the mind comes back, it feels good, feels right.

In this way the mind becomes more and more your own mainstay, so that when you have to make big decisions about your life, you have a mind state that's capable of making the decisions. And you can trust your ability to judge what's a good decision, what's not. This requires all of the skills involved in concentration: mindfulness, alertness, discernment, tranquility. If an idea comes in your mind, you don't get swept away. You watch it for a while. You think about it. If you were to make that decision, where would it lead you? Go through the steps. If something strange comes into the mind, learn how to recognize it as a strange idea.

Several years back when I had my last visit with Ajaan Suwat, he had been in a car accident and suffered some brain damage, but his training in meditation hadn't abandoned him. He was able to tell when the mind was sending him weird perceptions, skewed perceptions. As he said, that thing he got from his meditation, that didn't change; but he began to notice that his brain wasn't working properly. What saved him from falling for those perceptions was the mindfulness and concentration he had developed in his meditation. Even in his last months, he could recognize when the mind wasn't functioning right.

In contrast, a couple years back I was visiting my father for the last time. He was suffering from Parkinson's dementia. His case was very different. He hadn't meditated much—a little bit, but nothing really continuous. And in his dementia when he saw things, he couldn't tell that they were illusory. He'd see big black dogs coming into the house, and no matter how much you told him there were no big black dogs in the house, he insisted that there were, because he had seen them.

The difference between these two people was that one had trained his mind

and the other hadn't. The person who had trained his mind to be reliable was the one who could trust his mind. He could know if weird things were coming in, and could trust his judgment that they were weird. If you don't train your mind, you have no standards for judging things. This doesn't mean that an untrained mind can't have good ideas; many times it does have very good ideas, but the problem is it can't sort through its ideas in a really trustworthy way to see what's reliable and what's not. Because it can't trust itself.

The Buddha, who was a master of similes, once said that there was one thing for which there is no easy simile, and that's how easily and how quickly an untrained mind can change. He said that there is nothing else you can think of that's nearly as fast. The untrained mind can turn on itself. What you like one moment turns into something you don't like the next. And unless you develop good strong concentration, you don't have a solid foundation for noticing when the mind has changed, when it's turned on itself, when you can rely on it and when you can't.

So this is how we find refuge in life, for ultimately we can't depend on anyone outside. We can depend on the Buddha to be a good example, but he can't do the work that needs to be done inside us. We have to do that work ourselves. He can't do it for us. He sets the example, but it's up to us to be inspired by the example and do the work that's needed to be done so we can have the same virtues in our mind that he had in his. Once we can learn to trust ourselves, we can find refuge in our own reliable mind. Because we've trained it, we've made it reliable.

This is why when you have big decisions to make in life, it's a good idea to sit down and be very, very quiet. Set up the question in your mind and then put it aside, focus on the breath, stay with the breath. Get the mind so that it's really solid and still, and then from that perspective you can start contemplating the issue. Then do it again, and then again, just to make sure. You want to develop the kind of habit where you don't jump for a quick answer. You wait and you test things again and again and again until you know you can really rely on them. In that way, you learn how to rely on yourself.

So make sure as you're meditating that you don't become a traitor to your initial intention. The intention is to stay here with the breath, make it comfortable, make it a good place to stay. Learn to simply put aside anything else that comes in the way. That way you can begin to see through all the tricks that the mind uses to deceive itself. And that ability to have a steady gaze, a penetrating gaze through all the subterfuges of the mind: That's where you're going to find your refuge. That's where you can begin to find what's certain in life.

Informing the Whole Committee

March 16, 2006

One of the strangest things about the mind is that it talks to itself. You'd think that if the mind were a single thing, it wouldn't have to talk to itself. Everything it knows, it would know, without having to communicate. But the fact is there are a lot of different power centers or knowing centers here in the mind. It's like a committee, and the different members have to send messages to one another. They have to inform one another of what's going on. Sometimes one part of the mind will know something, and another part won't know. Part of the reason for this is that we actually build walls inside the mind. In some cases the walls are necessary in order to function. When you're paying attention to a particular task, you have to blot out everything not related to that task.

Sometimes the walls are very, very impenetrable, sometimes they're not. They're more permeable. In other words, you're working on a task but there's the possibility that if some emergency comes up, you can get a message through so that you can drop the task and turn to whatever else is more pressing. Say you're focused on reading a book, but there's a sudden sharp pain in your stomach. Okay, the message can get through so that you can stop reading and focus attention on the pain. Which means that there's part of the mind that's still surveying the body to make sure nothing really painful or horrible is happening, while another part of the mind focuses on reading the book.

But the walls can also be problematic. This is one of the reasons why we have our problems with the mind. It's not thoroughly informed. You can make up your mind to stick with the meditation. You can make up your mind to do something that's really truly going to lead to true happiness. But soon afterwards, you find yourself off wandering looking at something else. So this multiplicity of the mind can be a real problem.

Still, it's also part of the solution. In fact, it's what makes the solution to the problem possible. If the mind were a totally monolithic thing, if your sense of self were monolithic, you'd play right into the hands of that question of "How is it possible for something that's so unskillful and so ignorant to gain knowledge?" If the mind were a single thing, if your sense of self were a single thing, it couldn't change itself. That's the basic premise of the old issue of self power versus other power. The idea being that if the self is so screwed up, if your ego is so screwed up, you need some help from outside. It's only through surrendering yourself to some outside power that you'll be able to find true happiness, or to

save yourself from yourself.

This is the basic premise in a lot of the Mahayana, in the Pure Land schools. You need the saving grace of Amitabha or some Buddha outside to come and save you, because your ego is so corrupt that it can't possibly abandon its corruption. Any of the forms of religion that require you to focus on an outside power to come in to save you have as their premise the idea that your self is a single solid thing that's corrupt and can't possibly save itself. That's where the question of self power and other power gets born.

But the fact is that your self, your mind, your ego, is not a single thing. There are lots of different selves, lots of different minds, lots of different egos going on here. This committee going on here: It's because it's a committee that you can change yourself. One member of the committee can look at another member of the committee and say, "Your policy isn't working, your strategy isn't working. You've got to change." Because there is no one, overarching sense of self, the different members of the committee have learned that they've got to listen to one another. The people in whom the different members of the committee don't listen to each other—they get schizoid. The normally functioning human being has different parts of the mind and they listen to one another, and they know they have to listen to one another in order to function. This is what makes the practice possible. The difficulty simply is in taking the side of the mind that wants to practice, that wants to meditate, that wants to stay focused on the breath, and giving that member of the committee strength so it starts having influence over other members of the committee, so they all can sit down together.

So when someone asks us what kind of Buddhism we are practicing here, whether we're the other power kind or the self power kind, the answer is, "Neither." It's the committee power kind. You can apply this point immediately as you focus on the breath. There will be part of the mind that's intent on actually doing the work, focusing on the breath. And you notice there is another part of the mind that's watching, that can be alert both to the breath and to the conscious effort to stay focused. So learn to make use of that observer. That's the observer that allows for alertness, get all these different parts working together, the intention to stay with the breath, the ability to remember that intention, then the part of the mind that watches.

Once you've got those three parts working together, then there is going to be progress. They help one another along. And the more they learn to cooperate, then the more they are going to be able to get other parts of the mind in this together. So more and more members of the committee sit down and participate. You notice when the Buddha describes the process of meditation, it's not one quality acting alone that's going to make all the difference. He never said all you

need is mindfulness, or all you need is concentration. It's always clusters of factors. It's in the clustering that we gain strength in the practice.

So don't be surprised when you find that there are lots of different voices in the mind, or there's parts of the mind that know, and other parts that don't know what's going on. That's to be taken for granted. And he said that's part of the problem, but it's also part of the solution. Once you understand what the actual problem is, then you can work on gathering more and more members of the mind. The part that wants immediate gratification, well, you give a little something to that by making the breath comfortable. The part that gets easily bored, you give something to that by asking yourself questions about the breath, exploring this whole issue of the breath energy in the body. The part that wants to talk, well, you give something to talk about, talk about the breath. If you're skillful, you can give all these different voices, all these different urges some form of gratification so they're willing to pitch in with the effort. And as with any task, the more people you have working on the task, the quicker it gets done.

So think of this as a group effort. You keep surveying to see which parts of the mind are not getting in on the effort. You can see what you can do to get their cooperation. Because it is this way, bit by bit by bit, we get more skillful in this whole issue of trying to find a way out of suffering. We catch ourselves in different ways of creating suffering, and learn to convert the various tendencies of the mind to this one goal so that when there is a state of oneness in the mind, it's one in a good way, it's one on the path. And then when it's one, you can really teach it. This is why concentration comes before discernment. And there is an element of discernment that is needed for the concentration itself. But the discernment that's actually going to break through the mind's misunderstandings has to be based on getting as many members of the mind in on the message. I mean you can read a book and learn all about the basic teachings. And then as you put the book down, you find that you forget about them. Or even if you remember them, you start acting in other ways. You go back to your old habits. It's because not all the mind was there.

You want to bring your full attention to the breath. You want to bring your full attention to this issue of getting the mind gathered in a comfortable place. And the more the different factions, the more the different committee members are there, then when the message comes and they're all in a mood to listen, that's when it has a very pervasive effect on the mind. In many cases the insights that really make a difference in the mind are not anything new, nothing you've never heard before. It's simply that not everybody was there to listen, not everybody was there to see the truth of that particular insight. Once you've got the whole mind gathered together, then one single message can seep through everything.

This is why as we are meditating, it's not just a matter of getting the mind

focused, the body's got to be involved as well. That image in the Canon of taking the sense of ease and pleasure that come from the concentration, that come from a comfortable breath and allowing it to permeate throughout the body, working it, kneading it throughout the body, so that every part has a sense of belonging to the concentration, that's really important. Without that the messages don't get thoroughly transmitted. Some parts of the mind will hold back. But when everyone's working together, when everyone's feeling a sense of ease, gratification and fullness, then they all hear the lesson. They are all happy to hear the lesson because they can see how true it is. This particular insight that you gain really does make a difference, really does cut through ignorance, really does cut through this problem of random members of the committee causing problems.

Try to get everybody involved, try to get everybody to cooperate, so that the committee as a whole gets free from suffering.

Equanimity

April 16, 2006

Those five reflections we chanted just now—we are subject to aging, illness, death, separation, and we have karma as our arbitrator: Actually that's only part of the contemplation that the Buddha recommended. He said to go on to think about the fact all beings—men, women, children, lay or ordained, past, future, no matter what their level of being—are subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, separation; they all have karma as their arbitrator. The two sides of the contemplation are meant to lead to two different reactions. The side we chanted just now is to make you realize that you've got to get your act in order, to straighten out your life, because what you do is what makes all the difference in the world.

The second side of the recollection, though, is to give you more a sense of *samvega*, a sense of dismay over the nature of the human condition, to expand your perspective, to want to look for a way out, and also to get a larger sense of compassion. When you realize that everybody is subject to these same problems, it gets you thinking in terms of the sublime abidings, the *brahma-viharas*—limitless goodwill, not just for your friends and family, but for everybody, because everybody is subject to these same problems. Limitless compassion, appreciation, limitless equanimity. We're not the only ones subject to aging, illness, and death. The Thai translation of this passage is interesting. It says that aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal, separation is normal. We forget about that. So it's good to expand your perspective to realize how normal these things are.

There's that famous story of the woman whose child died, but she couldn't accept the fact that it was dead. She went around asking people for medicine for her sick child. So people sent her to the Buddha. The Buddha said, "Okay, it would be possible to make a medicine for your child, but it has to be made out of mustard seeds." Well, mustard seeds are easy, they were the cheapest thing you could find in India. "But," he said, "it has to be mustard seed from a family where there has never been a death."

So the woman goes from house to house to house, asking for mustard seed. Everybody's willing to give her mustard seed, but when she adds the conditions, they say, "Oh, no, we've had a death. My mother's died, father's died, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, children"—and after a while, it hit home. Her child was dead. She was willing to accept the fact because she realized this

was a normal part of the human condition.

If we had a decent education system, it would teach us how to deal with aging, illness, and death. But we don't have much training in that. Our education system is designed to make us producers and consumers. And the skills we develop in that direction are not necessarily good for the mind, and not necessarily helpful for dealing with aging, illness, and death when they come. This is what the Buddha's training is all about. You go to a monastery in Thailand, that's the first thing you hear: We're all subject to aging, illness, and death, and the lesson is to learn how not to suffer in the face of these things. We're all subject to separation. How do we not suffer in the face of that? That's the real issue.

Here's where the teaching on equanimity is important. It's the one of the brahma-viharas that helps keep the other ones from causing us to suffer. We want all living beings to be happy. Yet we see some are suffering and we want to help them. Sometimes we can, but many times we can't. That's where equanimity has to come in. Put your mind in a larger frame of reference – that we are all subject to our actions. So the question is, what can you do? Equanimity doesn't teach there's nothing you can do. It just points out the areas where you can't do anything, so you can focus on areas where you can be of help.

It's basically the reality principle. Notice in the statements for the four brahma-viharas. The first three start out: may all beings be happy, may they not be deprived, may they be released from stress and suffering. It's may, may, may. It's a wish. But equanimity is the reality principle: All beings are the owners of their actions. There's no "may" in there at all. It's just a statement of what is.

So you take that as your foundation for then looking to see where can you be of help, both in terms of your own suffering and the suffering of other people. Then you can act accordingly. That's when you really can be helpful.

One of the principles of equanimity is to just accept the fact that aging, illness, death, and separation are normal. The question is how not to suffer. That's what you can do something about. You know the old story about the man shot with one arrow who then shoots himself with another arrow. The first arrow is the suffering that comes as part of the way we live, the nature of having a body, of having a mind. These things are inconstant, stressful, not-self. That's the first arrow when pain comes up.

But then there's that second arrow. It's not just another arrow. Many times it's hundreds of arrows that we shoot ourselves with as we get all wound up around the suffering. Those are not necessary. And it turns out that those are the ones that really cause a big burden for the mind. If we didn't have those other arrows, just the first arrow itself would not reach the mind. It's our

misunderstandings, it's our tendency to get all upset around the suffering— those are the arrows that really hurt based on craving and ignorance. So those are the ones we want to learn how not to shoot ourselves with. When we stop shooting ourselves with those, the mind feels no suffering at all.

So you have to sit down and face the fact of aging, illness, and death. These things are inevitable, so what do you do? The Buddha says there are four reasons why death scares us, has us in fear. First is attachment to the body. Second is attachment to sensual pleasures. Third is the knowledge that we've done cruel and horrible things to other people, to other beings, and fear that after death we're going to be punished for it. And the fourth reason is not having seen the true Dhamma, having doubts about the true Dhamma. If we can learn to overcome these four causes of fear, death won't bring suffering.

And it's only when we've got a handle on these things that we can really be helpful to other people. Now this doesn't mean that you've totally overcome the fear, but if you learn to deal with your fear of death so that it doesn't freak you out, then you can help other people as they approach death, too. This is why it's not a selfish training. It really does put you in a better position to be of help. If you've sorted through your attachments to the body, sorted through your attachments to sensual pleasures, learned to focus on the positive things that you've done, realizing the punishment for the bad things is not necessarily inevitable, and even better if you gain vision with what they call the Dhamma Eye—vision of the true Dhamma—you can totally overcome your fear of death and then you can really be helpful to other people. But this doesn't mean you have to wait until that point before you can actually help them.

Take this issue of being afraid of the harmful things you've done in the past. The Buddha says that it's not inevitable that you're going to have to suffer from them. He gives the analogy of a crystal of salt. Say you've got a crystal of salt the size of your fist. If you put it into a glass of water, you can't drink the water. It's much too salty. But if you find a large clean river and throw the crystal of salt into the river, you can still drink the water from the river because the salt gets so diluted by the quantity of the water. That's an analogy for the mind that's developed the four brahma-viharas. When you develop this limitless quality of mind, the mind becomes very expansive. And it's the nature of such a mind that the results of past bad actions just don't touch it. At least they don't have such an impact, they don't impinge on the mind as much.

This is one very good reason to develop these qualities of mind: so that when the results of past bad actions come, they don't hit you so hard. And you can then train other people in the same skill. Get them to develop this larger, more compassionate, more equanimous state of mind. You can begin by reminding them of their generosity, the good things they've done for other people in the

past, the bad things they've avoided—these are forms of generosity, forms of compassion and good will. Because they open up the mind, make it more expansive. When the mind is in a more expansive state like that, the amount of suffering grows less.

So it's good to develop these qualities in the mind. One way of developing them is learning how to develop these same attitudes toward your breathing. Have good will toward your breathing, compassion, appreciation, equanimity towards your breathing. In other words, allow the breath to be comfortable so that you can have a foundation. Where it's not comfortable, work at making it more comfortable: That's compassion. Where it is comfortable, appreciate it. Sometimes, especially in the very beginning, the states of comfort seem to be very minor and not impressive at all. But that doesn't mean they don't have the potential to be more impressive. You've got to give them a little space.

It's like oak trees. They start out as tiny little acorns. Or even better, think of coastal redwoods. They start as the tiniest little seeds, and yet the tallest trees on earth come from these tiny, tiny seeds. Develop the conditions, allow them to grow and they become a huge forest.

It's the same with a sense of well-being in the body. First find areas that are simply not in pain, that seem okay. That's good enough. Just be very careful to keep them okay. Don't let the way you breathe push them or pull them, or squeeze them or anything. Just let them be all right, continuously, all the way through the in breath, all the way through the out breath, and they'll begin to grow. They develop a sense of fullness, and then you can allow that sense of fullness to expand throughout whatever parts of the body can pick it up. As for equanimity, when there are areas that you can't improve, develop equanimity for those. Focus instead on the areas where you can make a difference. Don't get worked up over the things you can't improve, because that gets in the way of seeing where can you make a difference, where can you be of help.

Once you get practice in dealing with the breath in your own body in this way, then it's a lot easier to develop these attitudes toward other people, because you've got a sense of well-being inside. You realize that no matter how bad things get outside, you've still got a safe place where you can go. From that position you can see more clearly and you have the strength to be of help where you can.

So, reflecting on the nature of the world, try to develop these qualities. Partly as your own protection so you don't have to suffer more than is necessary, and partly so that you can help other people. You put yourself in a better position to be of help because you're coming from a position of strength and well-being. This is just one of the most basic lessons you need in what would be a decent education—learning how to deal with aging, illness, death, and separation. Fortunately even though they don't give us much of an education like this in

school, we can educate ourselves.

Appropriate Attention

April 29, 2006

Focus on your breathing. It's a simple exercise: Just be with the sensation of the breath all the way in, all the way out. Notice where you have a sense of the breath, which parts of the body have the energy movement or the physical movement that let you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. And it may be in unexpected places. Just try to be sensitive to what you've got right here, right now. If the mind wanders off, bring it back. Wanders off again, bring it back again. It's a simple exercise but it's not easy. It takes concentration, it takes mindfulness, it takes alertness, all of which are qualities we have to develop.

Everybody goes through the process of finding that you focus on the breath and then all of a sudden you're someplace else—as if someone had come up with a big sack and put it over your head, dragged you off, and then dumped you out of the sack someplace else. You wonder how you got there. Well, you have to find your way back to the breath and fortunately it's right here. You don't have to retrace all the steps. Just come right back to the breath. And then you find yourself getting kidnapped again. It's important that you not let yourself get discouraged. Realize that this is the stage that everybody has to go through.

Sometimes you hear people complain that “I can't meditate because my mind is too distracted.” It's like saying, “I can't go to the doctor because I'm too sick.” No matter how sick you are, you've got to go to the doctor, because that's how you overcome your sickness. And the same way with the distraction. You overcome distraction by meditating: noticing it every time it happens and bringing the mind back. Try to be quicker the next time in noticing when you're distracted. See if you can sense the warning signals, the hints in the mind that let you know that the mind is about to go someplace else. Try to be very, very alert. The powers of mindfulness and alertness are things that will develop over time.

It's like going down to the gym. You can't expect to lift the heaviest weights right from the very beginning or to do the most strenuous exercises. You gradually work up to them. In the same way, you work up to concentration. You bring the mind as long as you can to the breath. And the next time you bring it as long as you can then. Just keep doing your best and your best will get better and better.

So be very clear about what's happening, and at the same time develop the

proper attitude, realizing that this is a problem everybody goes through. It doesn't mean that you're a bad meditator. It's just one of the stages that we all have to go through. This is the pattern that the Buddha himself followed on the night of his awakening. If you've ever read about his awakening, there were three knowledges that he developed before he attained nibbana. The first was knowledge of his past lives. He was thinking about eons and eons: That was where he lived, this was his name, this was his appearance. It's interesting what the texts focus on: his name, his appearance, the food he ate, his pleasure and pain that he experienced in that lifetime, then how he died and moved on to the next life. That's life pretty much: name, appearance, food, pleasure and pain, death, birth again. Name, appearance, food, pleasure and pain, death and birth again. Principally it was knowledge about his own personal narrative, how he had come to where he was right then.

But then he didn't stop at his own story. The next question was does this apply to everybody?

In second knowledge he gained between 10 p.m. and 2 a.m., he saw that all beings die and are reborn. And he had the further realization that when they die and are reborn, the nature of their rebirth is dependent on their past actions. The unskillful and skillful actions that they did set up the conditions for being miserable or happy. He saw the larger pattern by moving from his own personal narrative to a more universal view, realizing that it wasn't just him, everybody went through the same process. We had that chant just now: "I'm subject to aging, illness and death, subject to separation. I am the owner of my actions." In the actual sutta that the chant is drawn from, the contemplation doesn't stop there. It goes on to reflect that all living beings are the owners of their actions. All living beings are subject to aging, illness and death. That larger perspective puts things into perspective.

That's what the Buddha did with his second knowledge. He got things in a larger perspective. But that didn't constitute awakening either. After all, memory of past lives, visions of the universe, visions of beings dying and being reborn: That's not proof that these things actually happen. The Buddha wanted to know how to test the proof of these things. So he focused on that principle in the second knowledge, the principle of action. What was action? Action primarily is intention. It's a mental factor. He realized that your actions are determined by how you view things. So how about just looking at action in and of itself, intention in and of itself? Where do you look? Well, you look at the present moment.

This is what brought him to the present moment, to focus on what was happening in his mind right then and there—in particular, how his actions led to suffering and how other actions might lead to the end of suffering. That's how he

framed his approach to the present moment, by looking in terms of cause and result, skillful and unskillful. That way of framing the issue led to his awakening.

It's important to reflect on this as we go through the same process as well. We start with our own personal narrative and try to get into the present moment. If your narrative is messy, one thing to do is start cleaning up your narrative. In other words, if you try to get the mind to be quiet and start thinking about all the ways in which you were stingy or harmful to other people, it's hard to settle down. This is why meditation is part of a larger training, training in being generous and being virtuous, abstaining from things that are harmful, and helping people in whatever ways you can. That brings a good narrative to the meditation cushion.

But even then, before you get into the present moment, the Buddha recommends that you start thinking in a more universal way because otherwise there's that problem I mentioned just now. You sit there you think, "Gosh, I'm a miserable meditator. I can't do this." But when you realize that everybody faces the same problems, it's a lot easier to stick with it. There's less personal recrimination and more of a balanced, equanimous, objective view. And not just that. The questions you're bringing into the present moment depend on what your larger view is.

Often we hear that mindfulness is enough. Like the Beatles' old song: All you need is love. The refrain in a lot of Buddhist circles is: All you need is mindfulness. Well why? What's good about mindfulness? What is mindfulness? How does it function? You've got to have a view about these things. This is why, when the Buddha identified the most important internal quality in the practice, he didn't say mindfulness. He said appropriate attention, something we hardly ever hear of in Dhamma talks. "Attention" means how you frame the issue, how you frame the way you approach the present moment, how you look at things, the questions you ask. This attention can either be appropriate in terms of putting an end to suffering or inappropriate if it's not effective at all, if it actually creates more suffering. And the appropriate way to attend to the present moment is the same way the Buddha did: getting a sense of your intentions and seeing where they're skillful and where they are not.

Now intentions can be pretty slippery things. This is why we start the meditation with a specific intention: Very consciously say to yourself, "I'm going to stay here with the breath." Only when you set up an intention like that and try to maintain it do you start seeing other undercurrents of intention in the mind. The intention that wants to think about issues from the day, saying, "Here we have a whole hour free time, let's think about family issues or let's think about work issues." You might not have noticed that intention if you hadn't set up the prior intention to stay with the breath. You would have slipped off to those other

thoughts without realizing that there was any conscious intention there at all. So, for the time being, the skillful intention you want to maintain is the one that stays with the breath, that makes the breath comfortable. This is an important aspect. If the breath is uncomfortable, you won't want to stay. You may have the intention but it won't have any friends. It's facing what they call the armies of Mara.

So you need allies. One way of creating an ally is to make the breath your friend. See what kind of breathing feels good in the body right now: long breathing, short breathing, heavy breathing breath feels right. You can experiment to see. This makes it more interesting. And right there, you've got a lesson in skillful and unskillful intentions. Some intentions to change the breath end up with an uncomfortable, tight, restricted, or tense sense of the breath. You don't want that so you drop those intentions. Other intentions create a greater sense of ease. You realize that your intentions don't always show their results only in a next lifetime. Often your intentions show their results right now. That's an important lesson. Because the breath is so sensitive to events in the mind, it's a good way of testing this principle.

As Ajaan Lee used to say, when you meditate you want the right intention, the right object, and the right quality. Here the right object is the breath. Because it is so sensitive to the mind—it's where the mind and the body meet—that makes it an ideal object to focus on. The right intention is the intention to stay there with the breath. And then the third factor is the right quality: the quality of the breathing that feels good, the quality of the mind that's willing to be friendly with the breath, explore the breath, learn about the breath, it's willing to test things and then observe the results.

When my teacher Ajaan Fuang taught meditation, those are two words he liked to use a lot: Test things, he would say, and then be observant. And at first, you might not be too confident in what you're observing, but over time you begin to develop a sense, "Oh, this little hint shows that the mind is about ready to go. This is how I can recognize breathing that's good for the body, this is how I can recognize breathing that's good for the mind, this is how I can recognize breathing that's good for neither." You learn to interpret the clues. At first your conclusions have to be tentative. But remember, we are working on a skill here. It takes time to develop a skill but these are the qualities you need. You want to have the desire to work on the skill, you want to be persistent, stick with it, and be intent on what you're doing. Be really observant. Then finally use your intelligence to ask questions, bring that property of appropriate attention to what you're doing. When things don't work, use your imagination, use your ingenuity to figure out other ways of making them work. You can't expect all the instructions to come in the book.

It's like learning any skill. In the beginning you start with instructions that come in the book or what the teacher says. Ajaan Lee's example is of weaving a basket. You weave a basket as the teacher tells you to, then you look at: It looks pretty crummy. But instead of giving up, you say, "Let's weave another basket." Try to learn from your mistakes with the first one. Why was the weaving uneven? Does the basket look too short? Too fat? Does it look crooked? What can you do to make it better? This is where instead of learning from the teacher, you start learning from the straw or whatever it is you use to weave the basket. You start learning from your basket, you learn from your efforts, you learn from your mistakes.

People who tend to engage in a lot of self recrimination find this hard. This is why it's good to think about that universal principle, that everybody has to go through this stage. And it's an important stage because you refine your discernment as you do this. Discernment is the quality that's going to purify the mind. It's going to lead you to awakening. You can't sit here and simply hope for awakening to come out of the sky and whap you across the head. It comes from refining your discernment so that you see what's going on. You see where your intentions are skillful, you see where your intentions are unskillful. And ultimately you see what lies beyond intention. Because it's in your freedom to make choices right here in the present moment: That's the spot where freedom should be investigated. The potential for freedom is going to be found right around here.

This is why the Buddha has you focus on issues of your actions, your intentions, and their results. The really liberating potential of your awareness lies right around there. So this is where you want to look. This is why appropriate attention is the most crucial factor in the practice, the approach that looks at all of this as a skill that you're working on in the hopes of becoming more and more skillful in how you act, more and more skillful in how you evaluate the results of your actions, and how you learn from your mistakes.

When you bring this quality of appropriate attention to the present moment, you're setting your practice on the proper footing. And then in that context you develop mindfulness. In other words, you try to keep the breath in mind. You try to keep this perspective, the perspective of trying to be skillful in mind. And then you can be alert to what's actually happening, interpreting it within that framework of what's skillful and what's not, the framework of that larger view that helps make sure that you don't get tied up in how you're a miserable meditator, or how this is never going to work. You just drop that. Everybody goes through the stage of being a miserable meditator. The good meditators are the ones who don't stop there. They learn from their mistakes. So keep that perspective in mind.

That's how the skill of meditation can begin to show its stuff, what it really can do for you. Every time you sit down to meditate, always try to keep that framework in mind, that perspective in mind. Because that's what makes progress possible. That's what focuses you in the present moment in the proper way. We always hear that meditation means being in the present moment. It doesn't mean just being there. You've got to know what to look for, what questions to ask. And that's where the faculty of appropriate attention points you in the right direction.

The Balance of Power

May 13, 2006

There's a balance of power in the mind, in the same way that there's a balance of power in the world outside. We have a lot of different desires, and there's a tension among them. But as long as each of them has its say in one way or the other, things are relatively peaceful. Not really peaceful inside, there's a lot of pulling and pushing. And there is a lot of hype and desires come along. Each of them says, hey, I am your friend. I can bring you happiness. And when you give in, the desire doesn't seem all that bad. Whether it really gives you happiness or not, that's another matter.

Psychologists have found that we are really bad at figuring out what's going to give us true happiness. We tend to overestimate almost all of our desires. That's what keeps us going, going, searching for this, searching for that, keeping on looking for new things. And then every once in awhile, things begin to break down. We begin to realize that the desires we've been befriending all along are not really our true friends. Like that chant just now on friendship—it wasn't referring only to outside friends and non-friends. We have inside friends and non-friends, the ones who flatter and cajole, our companions in ruinous fun, some of our desires are like that. When you realize that, you want to switch to other desires. A desire comes into the mind for some real peace. Wouldn't it be good if we could find true happiness? A happiness that doesn't cause any harm to ourselves, doesn't cause any harm to anybody else, seems like a perfectly reasonable desire. But then you see parts of the mind will rebel. They'll fight back.

It's the same as with the world outside. Look on the TV and it's like every corporation in the world is your friend. They bring the good things to life as they say. But then if you start looking into their business practices, you find they are pretty nefarious. Some of them make their money off genuine suffering of other people. And some of them actually find that war is to their best interest. If you try to imagine a world order in which everybody could live together peacefully, it seems sensible, why can't we live together peacefully? Why can't people not cause harm to one another? But there are interests out there that would actually lose if there were peace, if there were no suffering. And they fight back. The more you try to cause a revolution in the world outside, the more these powers fight back at you, try to divert your attention from the real issue. If they can't do that, then it's out-and-out battle.

So you need allies. It's the same in the mind. If you are going to create a revolution in the mind where the mind can actually function without causing any harm to itself or other people, you need allies in the fight. This is why we meditate. This is why we develop right concentration. This is our main ally. In the comparison they have of the different qualities on the path, concentration is your food. It's what gives your nourishment.

So you want to develop these allies as much you can. In other words the idea of being peaceful, a mind that causes no harm, it sounds nice but if it doesn't give you some immediate visceral pleasure, it's going to be a hard uphill battle. Because your other desires say: quick, look, here is a quick fix. Just do this, do that, you'll feel great. Even though the feeling great may not last long, there is a part of you that gives in very easily. That finds it hard to wait for results way down the line. So in order to get that part of the mind on your side, you say, here, here's a nice comfortable breath, breathe in a way that feels good, breathe in a way that feels refreshing, gratifying. Experiment to see what kind of breathing will do that for you. You make the breath your friend. The pleasure that comes from comfortable breathing, that can be your friend as well.

So figure out how to experiment with the breath, because sometimes just the process of experimentation takes a while before you can do it skillfully. In other words sometimes you push too much, you stretch the breath too much, you try to force things too much. You find tension in different parts of the body and you try to attack it too directly, then it fights back. What this means is you've got to learn to develop some more finesse, that's something that comes with time. At the very least try to get at least one part of the body that feels good. Try to find the part that feels central, that you are on really intimate terms with. At least make this part good. So it feels comfortable as you breathe in, you are not squeezing or pushing it or pulling it, and then allow it to maintain that sense of ease as you breathe out. If there's any tension or tightness that you can detect there, allow that to dissolve away. In this way you begin to find a friend inside. Then the parts of the mind that want some immediate gratification, they'll become your friends too, they'll like it. Then you work on allowing that sense of ease to spread to different parts the body.

And this is something each of us has to find our own way of doing. In some cases you maintain your center on that original spot and just think of expanding your frame of awareness, your field of awareness to be larger and larger and larger, and then think of the ease spreading along with your awareness. That's one way of doing it.

Another way is to go through the body section by section. Ajaan Lee has you start at the back of the neck, going down the back. Some people find that easy, other people find it hard. If you find it hard, you might want to start, say around

the navel, because the movement of the breath is easier to see there. So make sure that your abdomen is relaxed as you breathe in, relaxed as you breathe out. Then go around to the back, the small of the back, keep that relaxed. Any parts of the back that seem to be pulling you out of a nice straight posture, allow those to relax. So again they stay relaxed as you breathe in, relaxed as you breathe out. And then move up, solar plexus, then around the body from the solar plexus to the back at the same height, and back to the solar plexus again. Then move up to the middle of the chest, and the same way around the body in the chest area, then the base of the throat, and the head. You can go down the shoulders to the arms, and then start at the hips, going down the legs to the toes. Work through the body, section by section, making sure that whatever section you're focused on feels at least undisturbed by the breath. And there may actually be a sensation that's related to the breathing process, so allow it to feel comfortable as you breathe in, comfortable as you breathe out. And you can go through the body like this as many times as you like, until you are ready to settle down. Then find one spot then spread your awareness out from that spot. So you are aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. And it feels good, it feels connected.

This way you are beginning to get a friend, you've got your allies in this revolution. Because there will be parts of the mind that start complaining. They don't get to wander around as they used to. They don't have the run of the place that they are used to having. But with the sense of full body awareness, it feels good, feels refreshing just to breathe. That begins to change the balance of power. This is not to say that it will gradually all become more and more peaceful without problems, there will be ups and downs. But over time you find that there is a shift and when there is this sense of ease, you have to be careful not to just wallow in it and forget where it comes from. It comes from your alertness and your mindfulness. Mindfulness is keeping the breath in mind, keeping the various techniques that you are going to use with the breath in mind. Alertness is checking to see how things are going. In terms of right concentration or what they call jhana, these then develop into directed thought and evaluation. Directed thought is when you keep your thoughts on one topic. And then evaluation is that you check how things are going and making adjustments as you need to. Then the other factor is singleness of preoccupation, means you really are one with the breath. It feels like the breath is filling the whole body, your awareness is filling the whole body. Everything is one, it's not splitting off into two, three, four, five, the way it normally does.

So those are the causes. Make sure you've got the causes right. Then the sense of ease, sense of refreshment, of rapture, those will come. And as long as you stay with the causes, the ease and rapture will just keep on coming. It's like having a

job. As long as you stick with the job, your wages keep coming. If you decide I've had enough of this working, I want to enjoy the wages, well there is no more income. And you find yourself soon at the end of your money. But if you keep on working, the results keep on coming. This is work in pleasure. You are working with your very intimate sense of the body. You are working in a way that makes it feel good.

This is why the Buddha said this is such an important part of the practice, because it gives you your allies. And also opens your mind to new possibilities. It is possible to find a sense of happiness, a sense of ease, refreshment without following your old sensory desires. The passage we looked at today during the study group, where the Buddha says it is possible that someone will know, have insight into the drawbacks of sensual desire. But if they don't know a pleasure that lies outside of sensual desire, it just won't make any difference, they'll just keep going back to their same old ways. But if you provide the mind with this alternative, there is a sense of ease and refreshment that comes simply from breathing, fully inhabiting your body, not running out after other things. Once you have that alternative, then it's a lot easier to look at the pleasure you used to get from indulging in sights, sounds, smells and tastes and tactile sensations. Seeing the drawbacks, being frank with yourself about the drawbacks. In the past it was hard to be frank about them, because you felt that, gosh, if you couldn't find pleasure here, where would you find it? There would be no pleasure in life at all.

But now you've got an alternative. That changes the balance of power. So you see right here, there's a sense of ease and refreshment. You don't have to spend all that time and money and effort chasing down things that just turn into shadows and mirages. And even when you do get what you like in the outside world, it doesn't always stay with you. The Buddha compares it with borrowed goods. The original owners can take that away at any time. The pleasure, say, you get out of another person, doesn't really belong to you. It belongs to that other person. If they decide they've had enough of you, that's it. You don't have any rights.

There is the image of the man sitting in the tree. He comes to a fruit tree, there's no fruit on the ground but there is fruit in the tree. He knows how to climb the tree. So he goes up and he stays in the tree eating the fruit. Another man comes along, who also wants fruit, but he doesn't know how to climb the tree, but he has an ax in his hands. So he is going to chop the tree down. There are lots of drawbacks to sensual desire and it's easy for us to see them. But part of the mind refuses. It's afraid, because if we don't allow ourselves to get totally immersed in sensual desires, to really get carried away by them, we fear there is going to be no pleasure in life at all.

So it's important that you learn how to develop this sense of absorption in

the breath, pleasurable, refreshing, feels really good just being here. That changes your sense of the range of possibilities. There is a pleasure that doesn't depend on those things outside, it's perfectly fine right here. It's nourishing. And even though simple concentration is not going to totally solve the problem of the way the mind causes itself suffering, it really changes the balance of power. You've got more allies in this revolution you are trying to create in the mind. Where the mind can live at peace with itself without causing any harm for you, any harm for anybody else. That's your desire.

As for the peace in the world, as the Buddha said, the world never has enough. It's insatiable. It's a slave to craving. But you don't have to be a slave to craving. You can free yourself by finding new allies in the fight. This is your path to freedom. It seems simple just watching the breath. It is not easy, but as you work with it and really approach it as developing a skill that may take time, it may take effort, but it's really worth all the time and all the effort. Because it does create that possibility that living without causing suffering, living without causing harm, living with true peace, at the very least with peace inside—that's a genuine possibility. And because it's possible, it's worth all the time and effort that goes into finding it, developing it, changing this balance of power in the mind.

People Suffer from Their Thinking

July 4, 2006

A passage in the teachings of Ajaan Dun describes an incident when a woman came to him and just poured out her soul about the problems in her family—worried about her son, worried about this, worried about that—and so he tried to console her as best he could. After she left, he commented to one of his students, “People these days suffer because of their thinking.” It’s interesting the way he said that—“people these days”—as if people didn’t suffer from their thinking in the past. Maybe he meant that prior to that time, Thailand was poor and most people were just worried about eating, surviving. Now that people have become wealthier, food is easier to get, jobs are easier to get, their thinking takes over and that makes them suffer.

This is certainly true in spades about people in the modern world because so much in the modern world teaches us harmful ways of thinking. The mass media are predicated on the idea that you are lacking and you need what we’ve got to sell. That’s the message they’re constantly trying to get through to you. And when you’re exposed to that message long enough, you start believing it.

The first step in the cure is to get away from the media, so that the message isn’t being drummed into you all the time. But even then, once you’ve been used to thinking in those terms, it’s hard to get them out of your system. This is why we have to train the mind. There are basically two ways of approaching the problem. One is to stop thinking, and the other is to learn to think in different ways, ways that are actually helpful to you to put an end to suffering rather than piling on more suffering.

As a meditator, you’ve got to learn how to use both approaches, learning to let the mind rest so that it doesn’t have to be occupied with thoughts all the time; and then, when the time comes when you really do have to think, learning how to think in ways that are helpful rather than harmful. And even when you’re trying to get the mind to be still, it requires a certain amount of thought beforehand. You’ve got to convince yourself this is a worthwhile activity, sitting here focusing on your breath. Then you have to think about letting the breath be comfortable, trying not to force the breath too much, just noticing what kind of rhythm of breathing feels good right now. This requires some thought, but it’s constructive thought. It’s okay to think and pose questions around this issue, because that kind of thinking and questioning gets you more absorbed in the breath.

It's not a matter of forcing the mind to stay with the breath no matter what. If you put too much force on the mind like that, it's going to rebel. It's like trying to hold a beach ball under water. As soon as your grip loosens up a bit, the ball goes shooting up out of the water. What you've got to learn is how to get the mind interested in the breath. Realize that this energy in the body that goes along with the breathing is an important factor in keeping the body healthy: not just alive but healthy as well. If the energy flows smoothly, if all the nerves in the body get bathed in the breath, that's going to be good for the body. When the body is more comfortable, it's easier to settle down and stay right here. It feels good. There's a sense of fullness, a sense of ease that you can develop just by thinking of the energy flowing through the body all the time. As soon as the breath starts coming in, the energy is already flowing through all the nerves. As soon as it goes out, it's dispersing out through all the pores of the body. Thinking in this way helps the mind to settle down and gives it a place to rest when it doesn't have to think.

But there may be a part of your mind saying: "What are you doing? This is a waste of time. You've got all these other issues you've got to worry about." And sometimes you can say, "No I'm sorry, this is not the time for that," and it'll stop. Other times though, you've got to reason with the mind. This is why we have the chants before the meditation. This is why the Buddha gave so many discourses to help you see that it really is important to train the mind, that this is the most important thing you can do in life. As for all the other issues you might carry around, you've got to learn how to look at those from a distant perspective. All too often we're much too close to the issues in our lives, dealing with issues in our family, issues at work, our own frustration with ourselves, and we get our nose right into it. When you get too entangled in these issues, it's hard to get a perspective.

So the purpose of the Dhamma is to help give you a perspective that will help you step back and look at these issues in the long-term. Get a better sense of what's really important in life and what's not important in life. The Buddha talks about four Guardian Meditations. These are things to think about if you have trouble getting the mind to settle down. There are four topics in all: the Buddha, goodwill, the foulness of the body, and mindfulness of death.

There are different ways you can think about the Buddha. If you find that the mind needs some consoling and reassuring—in other words, it needs some gentle treatment—just think about the fact that the Buddha proved with his life that it is possible for human beings to find true happiness. That's the basic message his life sends. And it's an important message. Because for most of us, we look at human life and what is it? People get born, they go through all this trouble to get an education. Some people get married, have kids. Sometimes it works out,

sometimes it doesn't. Then what happens? They get old. Their body stops functioning. And sometimes death and illness don't happen quickly. There are these long lingering illnesses and then they die. And you wonder, "What is that all about?" All that needless suffering. You look around and that seems to be everyone's life.

The Buddha's life story is very different. He found that it's possible through your own efforts to attain a happiness that's not affected by aging, illness, and death. In other words, there is a part of the mind that lies beyond these things. You can look at aging, illness, and death as little issues. It also helps to look at a lot of the other issues in your daily life, to see them as little things as well—and to remind you it is possible to find true happiness. It may take a long time, but that possibility is there. Things are not hopeless.

That's one way of thinking about the Buddha. Now if you find that you're getting lazy in your practice, the other way you can think about the Buddha is to remind yourself that the Buddha was here 2600 years ago teaching this lesson. You were probably here someplace too. Why didn't you take the lesson to heart back then? Why are you still hanging around now? How much longer is it going to take you? It's very rare that we have Buddhas in this world. The texts talk about how many thousands of years it's going to be before the next Buddha appears. And in the meantime his teachings are going to be forgotten. What are you going to do then? When you think in this way, it gives a little more oomph to your practice, more encouragement to put more effort in.

So, you can think about the Buddha either in a way that's consoling or in a way that lights a fire under you. Look at your state of mind and see which way of thinking about the Buddha is helpful right now and then apply that. One of the big tragedies of human life is that we have this power to think and yet for the most part the mind seems to have a mind of its own. A useless topic can absorb you and obsess you and it seems like it's got hold of you and won't let you go. Actually that's not what's happening. The thought isn't holding onto you. You're holding onto the thinking, even the thinking that seems to be the most frustrating and maddening. One part of the mind actually gets some pleasure out of it, otherwise it wouldn't hold on—the sense that it *has* to do this kind of thinking or *has* to browbeat itself or whatever. You've got to learn how to question that: "What pleasure am I getting out of this thinking that's driving me crazy? In what sense do I feel I have to do it? Is there going to be a reward for me if I do this obsessive thinking?" Look into that. And when you can catch sight of something of that sort happening, then it's a lot easier to let go.

The other three Guardian Meditations operate in a similar manner. You can think about them in ways that are consoling or in ways that give you more of a push. For instance, thoughts of goodwill: It's good to think thoughts of wishing

happiness for everybody, starting with yourself and then spreading it around, because that kind of thought holds no harm. It reminds you that you don't gain any advantage from anybody else's suffering, so why would you want to wish suffering on anyone else? This helps give you a larger perspective on the issues of life. Particularly if there's a cycle of revenge someplace in your life, this helps pull you out. Helps you step back. Of course the more stringent side of metta is that if you really do wish yourself happiness, what are you doing? Why are you living this way? Why do you do these things? Why do you say these things? Why do you think these things? If you were really serious about your happiness, you'd change the way you live. In this way, thoughts of goodwill can act as a carrot or a stick, depending on what you need.

The third Guardian meditation: the foulness of the body. You can think about that in a consoling way or a more stringent way. The consoling way is to remind yourself that many of the heavy issues in life are based on meeting the needs of the body. But look at the body. What is it? Just a few organs that are going to function together for a while and then fall apart. And a lot of these heavy issues around the body are really not all that important. Why make the body such a big deal?

As for the stringent side, when you see that you're really attached to the body, ask yourself: Well, what is it here in the body that's really worth being proud about? The Buddha once said, after cataloging all the different things that the body does, all the stuff inside the body, and then what happens to the body as it ages and dies, "Whoever would think of exalting himself or disparaging others on the basis of this body: What is that if not blindness?" In other words, your body may be stronger, more fit, more beautiful, whatever, but so what? It's still made of disgusting things and oozes disgusting things, and is subject to all sorts of diseases. It dies. So what's so great about that?

Recollection of death functions in two ways as well. The consoling side is that whatever the issues you have in life, there will come a time when they don't matter anymore. You pass away, the other people pass away, everything's all going to be forgotten. So the issues that loom so large in your life right now: You can look at them as something a lot smaller. They're not so overwhelming. On the other hand, you can use thoughts about death to realize you don't know when you're going to die. The Buddha has his disciples reflect every evening at sunset: This may be the last sunset you'll ever see. Are you ready to go? The answer is usually No. Then the question is, how can you best prepare your mind? The best thing you can do is to train the mind to have more mindfulness, more discernment, more alertness, so that if death does come, the mind doesn't have to suffer. He has you think the same way every morning at sunrise: This may be your last sunrise. Are you ready to go? No. If not, then train your mind. It's not

the case that when death comes we have no way of helping the situation. The body may die, but the mind doesn't have to suffer with the body's death if you're mindful enough, if you have enough concentration, if you have enough alertness and discernment. So work on building these qualities now, while you can.

These are some of the ways in which thinking can actually help you. It gives you the right attitude. The question is learning how to apply these different topics in a way that's appropriate for your needs right now. That requires learning how to look at your own mind to see what it needs. A good rule of thumb is usually to start with the more consoling side and see if that works, if it gives you the energy you need to practice. If the consoling side doesn't work, you can use the more stringent side, to see if *that* works. Once you see that the mind is willing to drop all of its outside concerns and settle down, then you can drop that thinking and just be with the stillness.

A lot of the meditation goes back and forth between being still and thinking, investigating and then being still again, investigating, being still again. The more solid your concentration, then the more subtle your thinking can be, the more subtle your powers of observation and analysis in the present moment can be. Meditation practice is not just a matter of forcing the mind to be still. You've got to learn how to reason with it so that it can let go at least enough to allow the mind to settle down for a while. Once it's settled down for a while, then you can reason with it again so that it can let go even more, of more subtle things, the things you missed when the mind was bouncing all over the place like a ping-pong ball. Now that it's more still, you can begin to see more subtle attachments. Learn how to investigate them. Then when you let go of those, the mind will be still on an even deeper level. Learn how to pursue it back and forth like this. Thinking and being still. Thinking and being still. So these two processes can help each other along.

When you understand the meditation in this way, the results go a lot deeper. And they really do help you find the happiness the Buddha found, the happiness that isn't dependent on anything all, but just simply is. It's there. The potential is already there in the mind. The issue is simply learning how to use the faculties in the mind—its ability to be still, its ability to investigate, its ability to think—in a way that really is helpful rather than the normal everyday way we use them, which just piles more suffering on top of suffering.

So look at your mind right now and see what it needs. Does it need consoling, does it need the stick rather than the carrot, or is it ready just to settle down? Learn to observe your mind then provide it what it needs.

Discernment

August 6, 2006

If you ever had to tackle a large or overwhelming job, you've had to learn the basic principle that if you want to get anywhere with it, you have to break it down into little jobs, into manageable pieces. Then you tackle the pieces bit by bit by bit, and after a while you find the job gets done. You need the large overview so that you know how to break it down into manageable pieces, but when you actually do the work, you focus on the little bits and pieces.

This job we have here of tackling suffering is the same sort of thing. It seems overwhelming. You can think of it as this huge big mass, and the Buddha sometimes talks about it as a mass of suffering—because that's how most of us experience it, especially when it gets really big, when it really weighs down on the mind.

But the whole purpose of discernment is to be able to break it down into little pieces so that you can see how it's constructed and how it doesn't have to be constructed. This is what the Buddha's teachings on the five aggregates, the six sense spheres, the four or the six properties, dependent co-arising, are for. They're all designed to take suffering and to break it down into manageable pieces. The reason we call this discernment is just that—its ability to see subtle distinctions—because the pieces are subtle and the distinctions between them are subtle.

This is why we have to practice concentration as a basis for this kind of discernment. If your mind isn't really still, if your awareness isn't really sharp and quick, you're going to miss all the subtleties. Everything gets glommed together. It's all right here, but if you don't see the distinctions, everything is going to stay just as a big lump right here, a big mass right here in the present moment.

Say, for instance, that you're feeling a sense of depression, a sense of sadness. There's a physical side to it and there's the mental side. The mental side is made up of lots of little thoughts that are all glommed together. So the Buddha recommends that you take it apart in terms of the *khandhas*, in terms of the aggregates. Look for the feeling, and then look for the perception. An important perception is saying, "This is my suffering, this is happening to me," which may be true but you don't have to think it. It's an optional thought. You could simply say, "This is suffering," and leave it at that. That would adequately describe the situation and would also be more helpful. The thing is, you have to catch the mind in the act of applying that particular perception. It will do it repeatedly

again and again and again. That's what clinging is. It's holding onto a particular thought and just repeating it over and over again.

When you can see that happening, you realize that you've got the choice to drop it. You don't have to keep hitting yourself over the head. This is the same principle that applies to right speech. As the Buddha said, there are things that may be true but if they're not useful, if this is not the right time for them, we don't say them. Take that principle and apply it to the mind, to your inner conversation. There may be perceptions that in one way or other are true enough, but they're not useful and this is not the right time for them. They're actually causing you suffering, so why bring them in?

If physical side of the suffering is what seems oppressive, take things apart in terms of the properties: earth, water, wind, and fire. Suppose there's a pain in your knee. The sensations you've got around that pain in the knee: Which ones are just physical sensations and which ones are feeling? In other words, which ones are *rupa*, or form, and which ones are feeling? Any sense of heat is form, any sense of movement is form; coolness, solidity: these things are all form. But then there's the feeling of pain that sort of flickers among them. It's something different. It's a different aggregate. This is where the aggregates and the elements can get together, and this is where we can distinguish among them. But one way of distinguishing between feeling and form is just that: try to see which sensations in that sensation of pain are simply the aggregates of form, the properties of the body, and which are the actual feeling. Try to tease these things out. This is the work of discernment. It discerns distinctions, it see things clearly.

This is why it's called discernment. You could translate the term *pañña* as wisdom, but that has an entirely different connotation. I remember the first year when I was practicing with Ajaan Fuang. He kept saying, "Use your *pañña*," which is both the Pali word and the Thai word. At the time all I knew was that *pañña* is wisdom, so I told him, "I don't have any *pañña*. He said, "Of course you do. If you're a human being, you've got some ." I began to realize maybe he was talking about something else besides wisdom. And I finally realized it was *discernment*: seeing distinctions, being able to tease things out.

So we're not here trying to gain the wisdom that lets us simply accept things. Sometimes people think that that's the ultimate wisdom of Buddhism: learning to be equanimous, patient, accepting of everything. Suffering comes, and you tell yourself that that's just the nature of experience, that's the way it is. Craving comes, well, just accept the craving, that's the way it is.

Now that is the *beginning* part of discernment, the ability to admit what's going on. But then as the Buddha said in his first sermon, discernment is not just knowing the truth, that this is the way things are. There is also a duty or a task to do with each of these truths. When there's suffering, you try to comprehend it.

And comprehending it doesn't mean simply accepting it. It means ferreting out the bits and pieces from which it's constructed. What are the raw materials of suffering? It is just these things: form, feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness. If you look at the suffering in those terms, takes a lot of the sting out. Because as you see the perception that it's "my" suffering or that "I'm" suffering is just that: it's a momentary event in the mind. But it brings a big sting with it. So you have the choice not to say that to yourself, not to think in terms of those perceptions. Then you find that as you take the events apart, tease them apart this way, there's less and less and less suffering. That big mass of suffering gets broken down into little bits. And as in the image in the Canon, finally it gets winnowed into a high wind and blown away, because you realize that you were the one who's been gluing all these pieces together, and then weighing yourself down with them.

The primary ingredient in this glue is the sense that "I am the one who is suffering, this is my suffering, this is happening to me, I'm in the midst of the suffering, or I am the suffering, or the suffering is in me." The Buddha has you take this sensation of suffering and tease it apart in terms of the aggregates and then ask of each of these aggregates: "Is this something in me or am I in it? Is this mine? Is this me?" And as you're able to look at these things—and it's not going to be a little block that you could sit there and watch. It's going to be a very quick event in the mind, especially the mental khandhas. But if you learn simply to observe that, "There is this, there is this, that's all," you see that as you encounter difficult situations—pain in the body, anything difficult, anything that would make you suffer—you have the choice to think in ways that would make you suffer or not, because you can see these events happening simply as events. That's all.

That's what discernment is all about. Ferreting these things out, realizing that they're individual events in the mind and you don't have to glue them together in the old way. You can look at them from a different standpoint.

This is what the Dhamma does. It gives us a new frame from which to look at things. This is why Dhamma talks are not just here for information. They're here to help you look at things in a whole new way, applying the four noble truths to your experience. That's the framework the Buddha gives you.

It's not only the framework for his teachings, but also the framework he'd like you to apply to your experience. It's hard to shift frameworks. We're used to our old frameworks, so we tend just to bring the four noble truths in as new information. If that's all they are, just a piece of news you've heard, they really don't make that much difference. But if you make up your mind that you're going to look at everything from this perspective, and keep at it, keep at it, you find that it's really useful. It not only points out the way things are, but also

shows what you can do so that you don't have to suffer from the way things are.

So try to get the mind still enough to allow your discernment to get more and more refined, more and more subtle. It works in stages. The more still the mind can be, the more refined your discernment can be, the more subtleties you can see—and the more you can put an end to your suffering. Ajaan Fuang used to say that the discernment that comes from concentration is special. It goes deeper into the mind than discernment not based on concentration. When you've heard the topics of discernment—four noble truths, five aggregates, six sense spheres, the properties, dependent co-arising—you can hear them, you can think about them, you can talk about them, but if you don't actually see these things in action, they don't go to your heart. The whole purpose of concentration is so you can see them in action. They are very quick, they are very subtle so you have to be very, very still. But if you see them in the stillness, the understanding goes straight to the heart. That's where it really can make a difference.

Right Livelihood

August 7, 2006

Of all the factors in the path, right livelihood is probably the one that receives the least attention. And so it's good to pay some attention to it. The definition in the Canon is pretty simple: you avoid wrong livelihood and you support yourself with right livelihood. It's hardly even a definition at all, because it doesn't explain the term.

In other parts of the Canon, though, the Buddha does describe right livelihood for monks: no hinting, no scheming, no trading gain for gain. In other words you don't promise to give a reward to someone who gives something to you. This is the way the monks live. It's very different from the way lay people live. For lay people, trade is the basic mode of livelihood. If you give me something, I'll give you something in return. That's the basic mode of operation throughout lay life. But when you ordain, you drop that. And you don't even hint, don't even scheme. You don't even try to plan to get anything out of anybody or think how can you attract support, or how can you attract donations from people. There are lots of rules to make sure that one monk, say, doesn't try to monopolize all the generosity of the lay people at the expense of the other monks. So that's right livelihood for monks. It's a very pure livelihood. You take what you get. You content yourself with what you get. It's purely an economy of gifts.

For lay people, there are a couple of examples in the Canon where the Buddha says to avoid certain kinds of trade. Trading in poison, trading in meat, trading in weapons, intoxicants, trading in slaves: The Buddha says to avoid these things entirely. And then there are a couple cases where people come to the Buddha and say that they have been told that their particular livelihood actually has a place for it in heaven. In one instance, it's a professional soldier who comes and he's been told by his teachers who taught him the trade of being a soldier, that if you die in the battle, you're going to the heaven of the heroes who die in battle. He wants to know: What the Buddha has to think about that? The Buddha avoids the answer. The guy asks him three times and the Buddha finally says, "Well, since I can't get past you, okay, I'll tell you. If you're in the midst of a battle and are consumed by the thought of trying to kill other people, either from greed, anger or delusion, that intention is an unskillful intention. If you die with the state of mind, you go to hell. Or if you have the wrong view that this is going to take you to heaven, you still go to hell, you go to the hell for people who die in

battle. Instead of going to heaven, it's a hell.

There's another case where an actor comes, and he says, "I've been told that when you entertain people, give them enjoyment, you go to the heaven of laughter where everybody's enjoying themselves." And he wants to know what the Buddha thinks about that. Again the Buddha avoids answering until the guy asks him three times. The Buddha says, "Okay, I can't get past you, so I'll tell you. If you're trying to inspire passion, aversion, and delusion in people through your acting, then when you die, you go to the hell of laughter, i.e., they're not laughing *with* you, they're laughing *at* you.

So if your livelihood involves inspiring greed, anger, and delusion either in yourself as you do it or in other people—think about advertising, all the greed that it inspires in some people—it's not right livelihood. That's the question of right and wrong livelihood outside.

But then there's the whole question of how you support your mind. In other words, by engaging in right livelihood there are many times you have to go without. Especially as monks, you can't try to figure out ways of attracting donations, you can't figure out ways of scheming or hinting or promising rewards for people who give donations, in terms of giving them things in return. That means that there are going to be times when you have to do without. When that happens, it's important to think of your other means of support: You support the mind. The mind does have its own belongings, all the karma it creates. Those are the belongings of the mind. That's what supports the mind. And just as your physical belongings can either weigh you down or support you, in the same way your actions weigh you down or support you. When you think about the fact that your livelihood is not placing a burden on other people that they don't want, it gives energy to the mind. The knowledge that your livelihood is pure, the knowledge that your livelihood is honest: All of these things give energy to the mind. These are belongings for the mind.

Ajaan Lee gives the example of the mind being like a tape recorder. Nowadays of course it would be an MP3 recorder. Whatever you do, it just gets recorded, gets stashed away, stashed away in the mind. So think about what you're stashing away. If you're stashing away honesty, or are stashing away any of the other the good qualities of the mind, this is a support. These things will actually contribute to the long life, the health of the mind. It's just the opposite of the principle where you gain your livelihood in ways that are unskillful. Even though you may have lots of things, things are not really supports for the mind at all. If you get them in a way that's dishonest and you start thinking about the dishonest things you did to get them, these things actually weigh the mind down. So even though you may have material belongings that seem to support the body, they are a weight on the mind, they eat away at the mind.

So remember the important place to look for the livelihood of the mind. Right livelihood, on the inner level, is what you're doing, the quality of what you're doing. Does it support you? Does it give you energy? When you can reflect on the things that you've done skillfully, that really is energizing for the mind.

So keep this in mind. If things get difficult physically—look at the state of the world right now. It seems like there are people who want to destroy civilization. They want to make life difficult for other people. And it's the nature of human civilization that no matter how good it gets, it's going to have to deteriorate. It could happen in our lifetime. So make sure you have your values straight, so that when it gets difficult to gain support for the body, at least you've got support for the mind. And that's much more important because that's the treasure you take with you when you go.

The image they give in the Canon is that the good actions you've done are like relatives waiting for you on the other side. They're happy to see you, they come up and they greet you. They support you. That's much better than being weighed down by what you have to do in order to scrape together some support for the body, which is going to die anyhow. Another image they give in the Canon is throwing a rock in the water. No matter how much you try to pray for the rock to rise up, it's just not going to rise up. As opposed to floating oil on water: The oil will float on top of the water. No matter how much you curse it, it won't sink.

So keep this in mind if things ever get difficult physically. The supports for the body are not your true treasures. The treasures that are lasting are the ones the mind records away, records away, through its actions. So make sure you're recording good actions, things that will support the mind, energize it, provide for its health and livelihood: things like the meditation we are doing right now.

Ajaan Suwat was once asked why we didn't have a God in Buddhism. In fact the guy who said this said, "You guys would have a really good religion here if only you had a God, so you'd have a sense of support when things get difficult." Ajaan Suwat's response was really good. He said, "If there were a God who could ordain that when I eat, everybody in the world gets full, I'd bow down to that God." In other words, the nature of supporting the body is that everything just goes into the body and disappears, disappears, as opposed to the support that you make for the mind. Not only do you benefit, but the people around you benefit as well if you support the mind wisely.

So that sense of well-being, the sense of self esteem that comes from knowing you've done something right: That's an important part of the path. Not only are you energized by it, but it also energizes the people around you. That's a real treasure. So make sure that you treasure it.

The Thinking Cure

September 18, 2006

The Buddha once said that he got started on the right path of practice when he learned to observe his thinking, noticing which kinds of thoughts were skillful, which kinds were unskillful. In other words which kinds of thinking lead to harm, which kinds of thinking didn't lead to harm. Notice that: He didn't say he got on the path when he learned to stop thinking. He got on the path when he learned to observe his thinking and to see it as part of a causal process. This is important, because a lot of meditation has to do with thinking. There's a popular misconception that meditation means not thinking at all. But if you look at all the descriptions of the noble eightfold path, you see that they all start with right view. Then they continue with right resolve. In other words they start with thinking: learning how to think in the right way.

This is why we have Dhamma talks. If thinking weren't involved in the practice, if your views weren't important in the practice, Dhamma talks wouldn't serve any function. You'd have to teach by example by not saying anything at all. But meditation doesn't work that way. You have to learn how to think in the right way as you come to meditation. This is a thinking cure.

In psychotherapy they have talking cures. And they note how amazing it is: Sometimes simply talking over a neurosis—getting it out in the open, learning to be very clear about the presuppositions behind it—can disband it. It loses its power. In a similar vein, meditation is learning how to watch our thoughts, to be very clear about how the mind thinks. Learn how to bring up its assumptions—the unexpressed assumptions or the ones just barely expressed—so that you can see them in the light of day. Then you can see what kinds of thinking you really *do* believe in, what kinds of thinking you don't. Often you'll find that things that have been having the most power over the mind are the ones that, if you really look at them, don't really make any sense at all.

So it's important as you meditate that you have a sense of the role and power of thinking in the meditation. For example, as we're doing breath meditation, try to get the mind to settle down with the breath, get concentrated on the breath. As the Buddha said, every state of concentration depends on a perception, a mental label you create, a little message you can carry from one moment to the next, one that you can remember, that you can be mindful of. Here that message is: "breath."

So what is your concept of the breath? How do you relate to it? We talk about forcing the breath, but the breath isn't the sort of thing you can force. You can force the blood to different parts of your body, and that's often what we do when we think we're moving the breath around in the body. We're simply changing the way the blood circulates. We can get ourselves into some pretty strange physical states this way, and they can have an effect on the mind because you're forcing the blood too much. In other words, you're playing around with what the texts call the liquid element, or the liquid property, and you've missed the breath entirely.

But this is the way we often relate to our body. An emotion comes up and a lot of the physical side of the emotion has to do with the fact that our blood circulation has changed. When we were little children, before we learned any language, we ran up against pain, and one of the ways we dealt with it was try to force it away. We actually used a change in the blood circulation to try to force the pain away. That became our instinctive way of relating to the body: to force the blood to circulate in a different way. This is why so much of the imagery of psychotherapy is from hydraulic mechanics. Emotions get pushed underground and then they force their way here, force their way there, the same way that liquids under pressure get forced around and break the pipes.

But as a meditator you've got to realize there are other ways of relating to the energy in the body. In fact, the only way you can really get in touch with the breath is to reconceive the whole way you relate to the body. The best way to deal with the breath is simply to think: allow. Think of the breath going down the back. You don't push it down the back. You allow it to go. When you think of the breath going to the different parts of the body, don't try to push it. You allow it. If you push it, you're pushing the blood. You're pushing the liquids in the body. What you can do is just think: open up, open up. Keep your wrists relaxed, keep your ankles relaxed. All your joints: Keep them relaxed. Think of opening up the passages by which the breath can flow. You can't *make* the breath flow. It's something it's going to do on its own once you've opened the channels.

So you maintain the thought of just "breath." You might want to picture the body and, say, think of breath going down the back, out the legs, down the shoulders, out the arms, spreading out in all directions. You can keep that picture, that perception in mind, but try not to force anything in the body. As soon as you start forcing things, it gets difficult.

This is part of the thinking cure: getting a new conception of the breath and learning to hold on to that conception. And you need a new conception of yourself as well, of what you can do. Often this is a huge part of the meditation. I remember looking through collections of Dhamma talks from the forest ajaans, and this applies to all of them: So much of their talks is spent not in explaining

things, but in encouraging. Reminding people that this is something you can do. You can relate to the body in a different way from the way you've been doing it. You can relate to the mind in a different way.

As the Buddha once said, if it weren't possible for people to change their ways from unskillful to skillful, he wouldn't have taught the practice of developing skill. It wouldn't have served any purpose. But it is possible. When you've been doing something unskillful, you can change. You realize that there is another way of doing things and that you're capable of doing it.

This requires a certain amount of imagination. That's the beginning of any change in your behavior: allowing yourself to imagine that you can change the way you behave. This is another part of the thinking cure.

This applies to all aspects of the practice. You start with generosity. When you make up your mind to give a gift, you're imagining yourself as someone with something to spare. Up to that point, you may have been thinking that you're hungry and lacking, and all you could think about was gaining, gaining, gaining, getting, getting, getting. But when you allow yourself to think that you have more than enough, you can give. And you begin to realize that this has very little to do with how much you may have materially. Poor people can often be more generous than rich people because they have a different idea of "enough." When you make this simple change in your thinking, you put yourself in a new place: a place with more dignity, a place of more inner worth.

The gift of forgiveness is the same sort of thing. Someone else has harmed you. If all you can think about is how much you're a victim, you make yourself a smaller person. But if you think of yourself as large-hearted enough to forgive, you suddenly become a larger person. That gives the mind more space to move around.

And so on down the line. You learn that you can observe the precepts. You learn that you can meditate, simply by changing the way you think about yourself and your capabilities.

So remember that this is a thinking cure. There do come parts of the practice where you learn not to think, but you have your reasons for not thinking. You're doing it with specific aims in mind, so be clear about your aims and where your aims come from. What are the values that lie behind them? What's your understanding of suffering and the end of suffering that lies behind how you do things? Make sure to straighten out your thoughts. Once you straighten out your thoughts, realizing how suffering comes about and how you can put an end to it, you've got everything you need to put an end to it. It's simply a matter of allowing yourself to think in those ways.

Notice that the emphasis is on allowing. You don't have to force yourself.

You allow something better than what has been happening to happen.

Ajaan Fuang once said that if we could force our way into nirvana, everybody would have arrived there a long time ago. But it's not something you can do by force. You ultimately get there only through discernment. And discernment starts with learning how to think in the right way. It doesn't cost anything, doesn't require a lot of energy: just allowing yourself to think in skillful ways. That can turn you around right there, and head you in the right direction. So before you stop thinking, learn how to think in ways that are really helpful, allow yourself to think in ways that are really helpful, and it will make all the difference in your practice.

Energy & Efficiency

September 24, 2006

There is a famous story of the young man who was very delicately brought up—so delicately brought up that he even had hair on the soles of his feet. When he ordained as a monk, he tried practicing meditation really hard, sitting long periods of time, doing walking meditation long periods of time. But because his feet were so tender, all that walking got his feet bloody. He thought to himself, “Here I’ve given all the effort I can, and nothing is coming of it.” He thought of disrobing. The Buddha sensed this and appeared right in front of him, and asked him, “Back when you were a layperson, did you play the lute?” The monk said he had. He was skilled at playing the lute. And the Buddha asked him, “When you tightened the strings too tight, what happened?” It didn’t sound right at all. “How about too loose?” Didn’t sound right either. And the Buddha then said, “In the same way, you should tune your energy to the point where it’s just right and then tune the rest of the strings of your practice.” In other words, conviction, mindfulness, concentration, discernment: Tune those to the level of your energy. In that way the practice will come out right.

So keep this in mind as you’re meditating. Look at the level of energy you have—this can be both physical and mental energy—and tune your practice to that level. Everything else has to be tuned to that. In other words when you’re sick, when you’re not feeling well, the practice goes one way. You may spend less time putting physical energy into the practice, and you may not be able to gain the levels of concentration or very precise mindfulness that you want, but do the best you can given the circumstances. When your energy level is high, don’t be too quick to say, “Well, I’ve meditated enough today. It’s eleven o’clock, that’s my usual time to go to bed, I’ll go to bed then.” When your energy level is high, stick with it. Tune your practice to the level of energy that you have. And do what you can to increase the energy. This is one of the roles of right mindfulness: gaining a sense where you’re doing the practice inefficiently. It’s like increasing the gas mileage on your car. You may have a limited amount of gas, but if the car is more efficient you can go further.

So try to do the practice as efficiently as you can. Look for areas where you’re causing yourself unnecessary stress, placing unnecessary obstacles in your way. Clear those away. This is where mindfulness and discernment come in—mindfulness here including alertness, watching to see what’s going on, how things are going with your practice. Use them to look for areas where you’re

expending wasted energy.

There was once a woman, a student of Ajaan Fuang, who had chronic cancer. It was amazing. She would get cancer on one part of the body, they'd take that out, then she found it in another part of the body. This went on for years and years. As far as I know, she is still alive. This started twenty plus years ago. One time, she developed a form of cancer that required radiation, but she was allergic to the anesthesia. So she told the doctors, "Look, I'm a meditator. I can handle pain. Let me just use my power of concentration." So they tried it, and she got through, but it took all her energy, and left her feeling drained. But she was able to make it through without any anesthesia. Ajaan Fuang went to visit her the next day and as she told him this, he said, "Look, you're wasting your energy. Try to use your discernment, too." In other words, get a sense of what's awareness as opposed to the object of awareness, and keep that distinction in mind. Just being able to make that distinction makes it a lot easier to deal with the pain. You don't have to use simply the brute force of your concentration.

So an important principle in discernment is learning what to let go of so that you're not wasting energy. This is especially important as you find yourself physically ill, as you grow old, as you approach death. A lot of wasted energy gets spent in your idea of who you are and what you're responsible for, and what you want to salvage out of all this. If you can remind yourself that the important thing to salvage is the state of your mind, keeping the mind as bright and centered and clear as possible, then you can come through a lot more intact. That's your responsibility, everything else is optional. So even though you may have been identifying with your body, you find there comes a point where it's an unnecessary burden. You may have gotten some use out of identifying with it but there comes a point in the practice where that becomes an obstacle to any kind of happiness. So before that point comes, you want to learn how to let go, realizing that any concern about the physical state of the body is ultimately going to have to meet up with the fact that the body has to grow old and ill and die, regardless of how worried you are about it. So the worry accomplishes nothing. It becomes a distraction and an unnecessary burden.

This is where it's important that you learn how to adjust your sense of who you are, and trim it down. It's like trimming down your luggage. You know you're going to have to travel, so carry only what's necessary. It's like going camping. You don't want to carry so much that you can't walk. At the same time you don't want to have so few provisions that you can't keep yourself going.

To begin with, make sure you just hold onto this ability to be mindful, alert. Get your concentration as solid as you can. In other words, hold onto good qualities. As for your other responsibilities, you have to keep practicing letting them go. Whatever work you've got to do, whatever responsibilities you've got to

look after, learn how to let any ideas of those responsibilities down. Learn how to dis-identify with the body. You may have to pick it up again at the end of the meditation, but for the time being, just learn how to reflect on it: What in here is something that you can really carry with you, that's really worth carrying with you? It's all physical elements. That list of the 32 parts of the body we chanted just now: Which of those do you want to take with you? They serve their function while the body's alive, but you'll have to let them all go. Besides, who would want to carry urine around or feces or contents of the stomach or lungs? They're useful while the body's alive, and you want to take care of the body so that it can continue functioning as best as it can, but there will come a time when it just can't do this anymore. So learn how to practice letting it go ahead of time, putting it down. At the very least you find this is a lot more efficient way of keeping the mind calm, keeping the mind still, clear, bright.

It's in this way that discernment is an issue of maximizing efficiency, husbanding your resources, learning what to let go of so you can hold onto what's valuable. If you try to hold onto too many things at once, you end up dropping them all. It's like juggling too many things in the air all at once. If they're eggs, they'll come splattering down because you can't keep track of them all. Juggle what you can manage. If you can manage one egg, stick with one egg. Don't get too grandiose about what you've got to look after. Keep things trimmed down, pared down, so that you're holding on only to what's essential. That way, you find that the issue of suffering and stress gets more manageable as well.

On Not Being a Victim

September 26, 2006

The mind has two basic functions. One is that it registers data coming in through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and intellect. And the other is that it wills things, tries to exert an influence on things outside. You might think of these as the passive and the active functions of the mind or the reactive and proactive functions, because even as the mind is receiving sense data, it's not totally passive. The willing function shapes the things you notice. Sometimes people complain about this: This is one of the reasons why we miss a lot of things in our lives, because we're intent on something else. That is a problem, but it can also be used to our advantage. When the Buddha describes dependent co-arising, well before he starts talking about sensory data, he talks about issues of attention and intention and perception. These factors influence the way you see and hear and experience things. And they can have an influence either for suffering or for the end of suffering.

So one of the functions of the path is to learn how to take this willing side of the mind—the side that has ways of attending to things and perceiving things and intending things—and turn that into the path.

One of the first things you notice as you meditate is that the mind does tend to switch back and forth between these two functions: the function that's simply registering what's going on and then reacting to that, and the other side that's more proactive. And you can see this very directly in the breath. You can simply watch the way the breath already seems to be, or you can put up a mental picture of how you would like the breath to be. Just a thought, don't try to force it in that direction, just think about it. Think about the breath coursing through the body. As soon as you breathe in, it goes all the way through the body, out to every pore. Just hold that image in mind. After a while, you begin to notice which sensations in the body seem to be corresponding to that picture you have. And you can try encouraging them a little bit.

In the beginning it should be just that, a little bit. Don't force things too much. Simply holding that different picture in mind helps you to read your experience in a different way, and also to shape your experience in a way that's more skillful. There may be a pain in the body in some place, and if you breathe in reaction to the pain, many times it just compounds the problem. In this way, the business of both reacting and then being proactive can get into some pretty nasty feedback loops. You feel trapped by a particular pain and then you breathe

in reaction to that sense of feeling trapped, and then it makes the pain worse. You feel even more trapped and everything just spirals down.

But you could think in other ways. You see that even though there may be pain sensations in that part of the body, is that all there is in that part of the body? Are there other sensations that are not painful? And your proactive side of the mind begins to change the way you experience things.

In some cases, pain is a little hard to tackle straight on, so you work first with the breath. Just think of the breath going well through the body. Think of the body as being light, filled with breath energy, healthy breath energy, luminous breath energy. Just hold that thought in mind. Don't be too impatient to see the results, because after all, the power of thought depends on a consistent strong thought that you can carry on over time. If you think a little bit and then scramble around looking for results from the thought, that's just a sign of impatience. The thought doesn't have time to exert any power, have any influence. So you learn how to hold that thought in mind and then look very gradually to see if there are any sensations in the body that would correspond to light breath energy, full breath energy, free-flowing breath energy, then you can encourage those. This helps you begin to see how much power the mind can have over shaping your experience.

In this way you take the willing part of the mind, the proactive part of the mind, and use it to your own advantage. This is why appropriate attention is such an important part of the path. When you could think about things in terms of who you are, what kind of person you are—you're the kind of person who's lazy, the kind of person who never finishes anything, the kind of person who is always a victim of events—and that just creates a vicious cycle. This is why the Buddha doesn't encourage you to think about what you are. Instead, he has you think about, "What's an action? What's the result of an action? What's an intention? What's a skillful intention?"

You can have all kinds of intentions that free up your mind. There are lots of different ways you can intend to focus on the breath. So find an intention that seems to get good results. It may not be the sort of intention that your preconceived notion of "you" would ever think of, but why confine yourself? Why make yourself a victim? Why leave yourself in that position? You can learn how to be proactive in a more skillful way. After all, all the elements of the path are fabricated. Your experience is fabricated through your intentions to begin with. And the path, everything from right view on down to right concentration: These are all fabrications. Right view means learning to look at things in a certain way, learning to look for certain things. So learn to look for some concentration, look for some stillness, look for mindfulness. Their potentials are there.

This is the Buddha's basic teaching on *dhatu*, or element or property. There

are physical and mental potentials just waiting to be nourished, just waiting to be activated. But if you sit there as a victim all the time, you'll never activate the proper things. You'll activate all the wrong things.

So it's not like you're totally passive. You are shaping events, but at the moment you're shaping them under the influence of an unhealthy feedback loop. Following the path means taking the power of the mind that shapes things and using it for good purposes. Remember the kind of person the Buddha was. He didn't just react to events. He had a very strong sense of what should be: There should be an end to suffering. He focused his conviction on that. And the power of his conviction made a difference. It reshaped his mind, reshaped his experience of things. It shaped his mind until it reached a point where it could see things very clearly in terms of why there is suffering and how you can put an end to suffering. It didn't just happen; it happened through the force of his will. Not blind will, but strong will.

So put some conviction into the path. Put some conviction into yourself. Realize that you can fabricate the path in your own mind, put together all the various elements, find the potentials in your mind for mindfulness, alertness, concentration, insight, and develop them. The mind has a power, and the problem is we tend to misuse it. We take that power and use it to create suffering, even though we don't want suffering. We just get into reactive modes, not realizing that we have the power to reshape our experience. Some people shape their experience in ways that are really harmful, but you can also shape your experience in ways that are conducive both to your happiness and the happiness of people around you. Conducive to understanding, conducive to release. So learn to take advantage of those powers, because that's the only way you're going to find your way out.

Doing, Maintaining, Using

October 4, 2006

Ajaan Fuang once said that there are three stages to concentration practice. The first is learning how to do it. The second is learning how to maintain it. And the third is learning how to put it to use. The doing is not all that hard—focus the mind on the breath. The breath is right there. You don't have to go scrounging around. You don't have to go to the ends of the earth to find your breath. It's right next to the mind. It's simply a question of learning to be more sensitive to it. That's the hard part of doing it: having a clear sense of when the breath is coming in, when it's going out, having a clear sense of when you are making it unnecessarily uncomfortable.

This involves watching it for a while, and then adjusting it. Think, “a little bit longer,” think, “a little bit shorter.” See how the breathing responds, and how it *feels* as it responds. You can think, “deeper,” think of your whole body all the way down to your toes breathing in, breathing out. Think of the breath all around the body. Think of the body as being like a big sponge and the breath is coming in through all the pores. See what way of conceiving the breath feels best.

Once you learn how to do this, then the trick is learning how to maintain it. In other words, learning how not to slip off. Learning how to make it comfortable is one of the tricks in learning how to maintain it, because the mind is always looking for food. What we're doing as we're meditating is giving it good food to eat. The sense of comfort that comes with being familiar with the breath helps get the mind more and more inclined to keep coming back. It's like feeding a stray dog. If you give it good food, it's going to come back.

The mind has a tendency to stray, but as long as you feed it well, it'll learn more and more that this is a good place to be, a really good place to feed. You can think of the meditation techniques as cooking techniques—you're learning how to feed yourself well. Most of us are the kind of person who just goes rummaging through a garbage heap, then eats whatever, anything that even remotely resembles food. And of course you get sick that way. Sometimes you get good food, sometimes you get bad. You hear stories about restaurants throwing out good food. So sometimes you get good food as you rummage around, but a lot of times it's garbage, really bad garbage. Sometimes it's spoiled. But you keep on eating it because you don't have better food. You don't know how to cook.

There was a homeless shelter in DC years back. They went around to all the

embassies and all the really good restaurants in DC and just asked for their leftover food. Then they took that and served it at the homeless shelters. All of a sudden the homeless people were eating French food and other exotic dishes. This got the homeless people interested in this kind of food. So right next to the soup kitchen the people who ran the shelter opened a cooking school where they offered to teach the homeless people how to cook French food and other exotic dishes. As a result, many of the homeless people became really good chefs. They were able to get jobs. This is a good metaphor for our meditation. We learn how to eat well, how to feed the mind well, so we don't have to go running through garbage bins. As the mind learns to feed well, it'll have a tendency not to want to go back to its old ways.

This leads naturally to that third step: using the meditation. The mind needs strength in all kinds of situations, and not only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed. In fact, it especially needs strength when you're dealing with difficult people, difficult situations, situations that give rise to anger, situations that give rise to fear. One of the important uses of concentration is to learn how to keep the mind with the breath in the midst of all kinds of strange situations, all kinds of challenging situations. Instead of leaping out, putting all your awareness outside, you try to keep your awareness centered inside as you deal with whatever's hard to deal with. That way you're coming from a position of strength. So you learn how to stay with the breath and keep the breath comfortable when there's fear, when there's anger, when there's greed, when there's uncertainty, when there are all kinds of things happening around you, or happening inside the mind.

This is where the concentration really shows its benefits, in that you can keep feeding and strengthening the mind even in the midst of difficult situations. It's also by learning how to feed the mind in situations like this that you gain more and more insight into the mind. You begin to see how it slips off into its old habits, what tempts it to slip off. Sometimes it's fear. You're afraid if let our old defenses down, this new defense is not going to help us. But as you get more confident in your meditation, you begin to realize this is a much better defense, coming from a position of strength. When the mind is calm and centered, you can think more clearly. Then you learn how to apply it. In situations where you would tend to get depressed, you can cheer up the mind simply by the way you relate to the breath, by the way you relate to your sense of the body. Other times, when the mind seems scattered all over the place, you can learn how to focus it and settle it down, and just keep it really, really solidly based.

The Buddha talks about three important skills in learning how to keep the mind centered. One is gladdening the mind, another is steadying the mind, and the third is liberating the mind. Whenever you find that a particular feeling has

taken over, you learn how to pry the mind loose from that, from its grip, so that the mind is free even in the midst of situations that would normally tie it down or oppress it.

So all of these are techniques in the proper care and feeding for the mind. As you feed the mind properly like this, it leads naturally into gaining insight into the various component factors of your meditation. You've learned that in this situation you have to add more pleasure, in that situation you have to change your perceptions, in this situation you have to change the way you think about these things. Well, these are all different aggregates: feeling, perception, thought constructs. And as you learn how to use them in different ways to deal with different situations, they begin to stand out more clearly because you see them in action, you've used them in action.

This is when you're going to gain real insight into them, how you can relate to them in a way that's healthy rather than just grabbing on and gobbling them down. This is how the mind begins to gain insight into its attachments. Because it sees the component factors, it's learned how to use them in a way that it's really on familiar terms with them, and it's changed its relationship to them. They now become tools rather than things that you would identify with or things that you are constantly chewing on, because you've learned how to feed the mind better, feed it more skillfully.

So wherever you are in the practice, if you find that you haven't been able to do the concentration, work on just bringing things together here. Once you've learned how to do it, then learn how to maintain it. And when you learn how to maintain it, the way to gain insight into it is not to try to take it apart yet. It's through learning to apply it to all kinds of different situations so that you get a really good feel for it. As you gain that feel for it, then the various elements of form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, and consciousness begin to separate out. You can watch them for what they are. Then when you let them go, it's not that you throw them away. You've simply learned that you don't have to identify with them. You can pick them up when you need them, put them down when you don't. So this is how the practice of concentration leads to discernment. It teaches you how to eat well, how to feed the mind well, to the point where ultimately it doesn't have to feed anymore.

Before Your Face Was Born

October 8, 2006

Back when I was in grade school, my mother was chairman of the local school board. It wasn't much of a school: just three classrooms, grades one through eight, sixty kids in the school. My first grade teacher, also second and third grade teacher, would stop by at the house every now and then after school to talk things over with my mother. One day they got onto the topic of religion. My teacher was Roman Catholic, and she said something that even when I was six years old sounded odd. She said, "Well, if being Catholic doesn't make you better than other people, what good is it?"

When you stop and think about it, that's what a lot of people do in this world. They do something because they think it makes them better than other people. Sometimes really crazy things—and often the crazier the activity, the more they have to justify it by saying that it makes them better than other people. That whole mindset—the idea that there are people who are better than others or worse than others or equal to others—is a real trap because it tends to swing you back and forth between extremes: either exaggerated self-esteem or exaggerated self-hatred, back and forth, back and forth. And either extreme can make you miserable because the idea of self, of who you are, becomes the big issue in life. You have to do everything you can to shore it up. Then when you find yourself doing things that are not up to that high standard, you feel like a failure.

It's good to remind yourself that all those issues are useless. They don't accomplish anything at all. They are what Ajaan Maha Boowa calls the fangs of unawareness, the fangs of ignorance: this whole issue of conceit.

So remember: We're here meditating not because it makes us better than anybody else, but simply because we want to be happy, and we want to have a happiness that's worth the effort that goes into it. We know that for our happiness to last, it has to be a happiness that doesn't harm anybody else. So we're compassionate to others—again, not because it makes us a better person, but because it leads to true happiness. When you keep the issue close to the ground in that way, you don't have to go swinging back and forth between extremes of self-esteem or self-hatred. You can focus simply on the question of whether your happiness is true.

Think back on the forest tradition. It was started by sons of peasants up in northeast Thailand, which is the poorest part of the country. And one of the

issues Ajaan Mun found himself dealing with again and again was students feeling that they didn't have what it takes to really do the practice. He kept reminding them: You've got a human body and you've got a mind that doesn't want to suffer. That's all you really need. As for how well you're going to do in the practice, you start where you are.

This is one of the reasons why we have the recollection of the Sangha to set our standards right. You look at all the people who've been practicing: There have been men, women, and children; rich people, poor people; healthy people, sick people. And what do they have in common? They wanted true happiness and they were willing to do what it takes. That's all you really need in the practice. The question of whether this makes you better than anyone else is not an issue. That issue of pride tends to come in when you do crazy things and then have to justify them to yourself. You look at all the rituals and rules that used to be a big part of religion, and still are part of a lot of religions: They make no sense at all. And yet people keep on doing them because they have the idea that these things make them better than other people. The more unreasonable the rule or ritual, the better they are for their willingness to submit to it. It makes no sense at all.

So fortunately in the Buddha's teachings, we don't have rules like that. There are a fair number of rules but they make sense. You think of the Buddha himself prior to his Awakening: When he was trying to find the path, he spent six long years in austerities. And what can keep you going through six long years of austerities? The idea that the austerities make you better than other people. That's what kept him going for six years. But then he realized: All those sacrifices were really for nothing. When you can admit that to yourself—that what you thought made you special was really a waste of time—that's when you learn humility. And when you learn humility, you're ready to learn what you really need to know.

So it's good to come to the practice with an attitude of humility. We've been making mistakes all along. It's good to be able to admit the mistakes and to realize that, Yes, the mind does need training. Ok, here is an opportunity to do it. A lot of my training with Ajaan Fuang consisted of his pointing out to me where my weak points were. He wasn't doing it all the time, but he did it at strategic times. He once commented on how Westerners are very stubborn. I had to reflect, well, how many Westerners had he ever met in his life? I think I was the only one.

So that was the prime lesson I had to learn: how not to be stubborn, and especially not stubborn in trying to shore up my exaggerated sense of myself. And it really helped. I found myself having to do things that I knew I wasn't really good at. When he was sick, I had to look after him. I wasn't especially good at it, but there was nobody else there. Even though I wasn't doing a perfect job, it was

better than nobody helping him at all. That thought was enough to keep me going. So finding myself spending a lot of time working on tasks that I wasn't automatically good at was very good for me. I learned a lot.

So it's important that you come to the meditation without the idea that you're already going to excel at it. In fact one of Ajaan Fuang's strongest terms of criticism was for somebody who thought he was already good before he had even tried it. *Ruu kawn koed, loed kawn tham* was his phrase. You know about things before they happen, and you're excellent before you've even tried your hand. That attitude, he said, sets you up for a fall. All that's asked is that you realize you're suffering, you realize your actions are the important cause for your suffering, and you're willing to learn. Any attitudes that go beyond that set you up for a fall.

This is why right view focuses on the issue of suffering. There's no question about making you a better person. It's simply a matter of seeing where there's suffering and where there's a cause of suffering. That motivation goes a lot deeper than your self-image. When you were a little baby, you didn't have a self-image, but you did know you were suffering and you tried to figure out some way to stop it.

So try to dig back into that attitude: That's your face before you were born. You weren't concerned about your face or what it looked like, or what other people would think about what it looked like. There was just that plain old issue of suffering and you knew that something had to be done about it. Well, here's a path to do something about it. So dig back into that attitude—even before your face was born. There was just the issue of suffering and the need to overcome it. When you have that attitude, that's all you really need. And the questions of who you are or how your performance as a meditator reflects on you: Those are thoughts to put aside. It's not the case that we don't pass judgment on our actions, but don't let the issue of who you are or how good you are become the object of judgment.

There's a difference between being judgmental and being judicious. Judgmental is when you're impatient and you want to come to a decision really fast without putting any effort into finding out the facts of the case. That's judgmentalism. It's harmful. It can lead to a lot of unskillful behavior. Being judicious is when you look at an action to see: Does this action really help put an end to suffering or does it cause more suffering? You look at the results and then adjust your next action accordingly. You're not here to judge you as a person; you're here to judge your actions and learn from them. That's being judicious, and that's where your powers of evaluation, your faculty of judgment, really are appropriate.

When the issue of your identity or your self-image gets in the way, put it

aside. If you find it hard to put it aside, don't say, "This is something really wrong with me," for that gets you into a tailspin. Don't worry about that. Just notice each time it comes and then say, "I know this one; I know where it goes," and do your best to let it go. That's when you can focus on the issue at hand, which is the fact that there is suffering, but there is a potential, there is a path to put an end to it. You've got the opportunity to follow that path. That's all that really matters.

The Riddle Tree

October 12, 2006

There's a story of a young American monk ordained in Thailand who went to study with one of the famous forest ajaans. He asked the ajaan, "What meditation object is going to bring calm and peace to my mind?" And the ajaan said, "I don't know. You have to find out." The young monk hearing, "I don't know," thought it meant that "I don't know anything about meditation." He ended up disrobing and going someplace else. But that's not what the ajaan meant. What he meant was that each of us has to find out what's going to work for us as we meditate. You have to find the object that's most suitable for you, and the best way to relate to it. The whole purpose of developing concentration is to get the mind to settle down, and the way to get it to settle down is to give it a place where it likes to stay settled. What's going to work for you is going to depend on your preferences, on your background, on all kinds of factors that are purely personal.

For each of us, the process of developing concentration is an individual thing. So you have to explore. There's no telling exactly what kind of breathing is going to be good for you, or whether there are times when you need to focus on something else instead: like recollecting the Buddha, recollecting the Dhamma, the Sangha, contemplating of the body, developing thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity. It's really a personal matter which of these is going to work for you.

There's no one-size-fits-all kind of meditation. Breath meditation comes the closest to a universal object because, after all, we all have a breath, and for all of us it's an important part of our lives. Ajaan Lee recommends taking it as your home base. It's the safest of all meditation objects. But there are times when you need to forage around in other areas. You may find yourself way off in left field and have to find your way back to home base. It may require thoughts of goodwill to get back there or it may require contemplation of the body. This is something you have to explore for yourself. You have to experiment. You have to learn how to observe to see what works.

This is why being observant is so essential to the practice. There's a lot that even the most psychic teacher who can read minds cannot tell you. Ajaan Fuang, who I firmly believe could read my mind and the minds of many other people, said one time, "Even when you can read minds, you can't tell what's going to work for somebody: how they'll respond to your words, what technique is going to work for them. That's something that they have to find out from within." So

be willing to explore.

The same principle applies not only to tranquility, but also to insight. There's a sutta called *The Riddle Tree* in which a monk goes to different senior monks and asks them, "What topic do you contemplate in order to gain awakening?" One monk says, "the five aggregates," another one says, "the six sense media," another one says, "the six elements," another one says "dependent co-arising." The monk was not satisfied with all these different answers, because he couldn't understand why their answers should be so different. So he went to see the Buddha. And the Buddha said that the different answers were like the Riddle tree. Apparently there's a tree in India that's kind of like the coral tree: During some seasons it has leaves, and at other seasons it has no leaves at all, and when it has no leaves it puts out red flowers. It's called the Riddle tree because people would say, "What's black like coal in the winter and red like meat in the spring?" That sort of thing. In other words, the appearance of the tree depends on which time of year you're talking about. "In the same way," the Buddha said, "those different monks answered in different ways because for each of them a different topic worked, so they talked in line with what had worked for them."

So again with regard to insight, there's no one-size-fits-all, no one technique that's going to work for everyone. But if you're observant while you calm down the mind, you begin to see the way *your* mind works. That's really what you want to know. Some people as they are meditating tend to focus on the issue of feeling: which feelings are pleasant and how to relate to pleasant feelings. Sometimes you find it easy to stay focused on the breath and have a pleasant feeling alongside the breath, and yet not get distracted. Other people have a real problem. As soon as a pleasant feeling comes up, they drop the breath, run to the pleasant feeling, and end up losing their focus. So in that case, it's going to be important to gain insight into the nature of feeling just to get the mind to settle down.

This is how discernment fosters concentration. The typical pattern, of course, is that concentration fosters discernment. But as the Buddha said at one point, to get the mind to settle down to good strong concentration you need both tranquility and insight. Sometimes you'll depend more on one side than on the other. And it will vary from day to day, from session to session, even from right now to five minutes from now. Sometimes when you're starting to get the mind to settle down, it's simply a matter of getting it calm and not thinking about anything else. All you have to do is allow the meditation object to do its work. At other times, you have to understand what you're doing, understand the problems that are arising, learn how to ask questions and attempt answers.

So if you notice that you're having a problem slipping off into feelings of pleasure and finding yourself in a nice hazy spot where you don't really know where you are – you're not asleep, but you're not really focused on anything—

you know you've got a problem with pleasure. You've got to back up. What can you do? Well, when there's a pleasant rhythm going in the breath, you've immediately got to work on developing your frame of reference, spreading your awareness so that it fills the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. In other words, you have to change your perception of what you're focused on in order to overcome the attraction to the feeling.

This of course then gets you into issues of perception—*sañña* in Pali—and the role it plays in meditation. In cases like that you may find that the perception becomes the issue on which you have to focus in order to gain insight. This is particularly true as you're shifting from form levels of concentration to the formless. It's a shift in perception. You're right here when you go from, say focusing on the breath to the point where the breath gets really still. You begin to notice that the boundary of the body begins to disappear. It's as if your sensation of the body is just a cloud of little sensation droplets or little sensation points, and you learn how to stay there for a while.

Sometimes you feel afraid of the fact that the breath isn't coming in and out, so you switch back. You have to learn how to not get fooled by that thought construct. When you get past that, then you realize that instead of focusing on the little droplets or points of sensation, you can focus on the space in between. Now if you find yourself suddenly visualizing infinite space, you might get disoriented, because your mind stretches out to the limits of infinity of that space. That can be calming, or you might find it disturbing. If it's disturbing, ask yourself: Which sense door are you focused on? Are you focused on the visual sense door or the bodily sense door? This is where you switch from issues of the aggregates to issues of the sense doors. Stay simply with the bodily sensation of space. Don't go off into the visualization of space, because the sensation of space can be really pleasant but the visualization can be disorienting.

Then from there on in, it's more an issue of perception again. How are you going to label this experience? You can label it as space, or you can label it simply as infinite consciousness: what's aware of the space. Or the sense of oneness in that infinite consciousness. What happens if you drop the perception of oneness? Nothingness. And what happens when you drop the perception of "nothing"? And so on down the line. You see that as you get the mind through stages of concentration, you're going to be shifting around among issues of thought fabrication or perception or feeling or consciousness or form, the body: all the aggregates.

Or you may find that the issue is how you visualize things as opposed to how you feel them: those are issues of the sense media. Or you start looking into questions of causation: What are you doing that's causing stress in any particular state of mind? You can't let go of the stress. As the Buddha said, your duty with

regard to stress is to comprehend it. But you can figure out what thought formation, what craving is causing it; then you can stop that. It's like finding yourself choking on smoke. You can't put out the smoke, but you can put out the fire. And you find that this kind of analysis works on getting you from one stage of concentration into another.

So simply putting the mind through its paces as you get it to concentrate begins to throw up certain issues about the aggregates, sense media, causality. And the issues that you tend to find most fascinating or those that cause you the most trouble: Those are the issues you should focus on for the sake of insight, the insights that first lead to stronger concentration, and then lead to release.

No one can tell you beforehand what's going to be the topic on which you can settle down—what kind of breathing is going to be best for you, or when there are times you have to focus on something else in addition to the breath or beside the breath. No one can tell you what's going to give rise to insight. There are all sorts of insight techniques out there, but they're really just sophisticated forms of concentration. The actual insight has to come from seeing how your own mind works. And the best way to see it working is to put it through the laboratory experiment of getting it to settle down.

It's like learning how to cook. You can just throw some ingredients in the pot and hope that it comes out Ok. Or you can begin to notice what kind of cooking techniques work best, so that the thing gets cooked through without burning. Or if you're fixing a stew of different vegetables, which vegetables have to go in first, which vegetables go in later, so that you don't end up with some undercooked and others overcooked. Looking for the technique that works: That's what gives rise to insight, gives rise to understanding about the food. And the same principle works in the mind. You've got to notice what works and where you have problems; learn how to question the problems and figure out an answer. The basic terms of analysis in terms of the aggregates, the sense media, the elements, dependent co-arising, are there to give you ideas. But as to what's actually going to work in any particular situation depends on your own proclivities, your own powers of observation, your own ingenuity.

That's when the insight becomes not just a topic you read about or something you try to impose on the mind, but something that grows naturally out of the practice of learning how to bring the mind to a sense of peace, a sense of calm. The more natural the questions and the experience, the deeper the insight is going to go, and the more relevant it is to the actual suffering that's going on in your mind.

So this is why meditation is a process of exploration. You're not trying to clone enlightenment. You're trying to explore cause and effect as they reveal themselves in the process of bringing your own mind to peace.

Close to What You Know

October 16, 2006

Our minds are filled with all kinds of knowledge, but exactly how certain is that knowledge and how useful is it? Right now as you're meditating, there's not much you need to know. You're sitting here focusing on your breath, so notice how the breath feels. If it doesn't feel comfortable, see what you can do to make it more comfortable. In other words, notice what you're doing and notice the results. That's a very direct kind of knowledge. The sensation of ease or stress or whatever you're feeling with the breath: that's something you experience directly. That's the sort of thing you experienced back when you were a child before you knew language at all. It's a very direct kind of knowledge. As you move away from this level of experience, things get less and less certain.

To function in many areas of life, we have to deal with uncertainties. But for the time being, let's stick with what's really certain: just what you're doing with the breath and the results you're getting. Notice when you're putting too much pressure on the breath, or not enough pressure – “not enough” meaning that the mind just starts floating away. As you do this, you're learning a very important principle: the principle of action. This, for the Buddha, is a basic truth—cause and effect, the actions you do and the results you get. When he described his Awakening in its simplest terms, he put it as a principle of causality, which applied directly to this issue. What are you doing and what results are you getting? In particular, what are you doing that's causing suffering? What can you do to put an end to suffering?

Those are his basic building blocks. As for other issues that come up in the practice, they should all be related back to those building blocks. Like the whole question of self: We're often told that the Buddha taught that there wasn't a self, but then immediately the question is: Who's doing the actions? Who's receiving the results? What goes from one life to the next? But that's putting the cart before the horse, assuming that this teaching on not-self, which is an interpretation, is the primary teaching. We forget that the primary teaching is the fact of action and result, skillful and unskillful. If you take that as your context, then the issue of self becomes a question of: What kind of activity is self? And what are the results of selfing in different situations?

When you look at your sense of self in that way, you begin to realize that it's something you do, something you put together given certain circumstances. You perceive a certain world out there, and again, that's an assumption based on some

things you've done. Then you assume a self acting in that world. This selfing is not just metaphysical, it's often psychological. You sense certain motives that other people have, and you react to those assumptions. And what often happens is that you often suffer. If it's the four-year-old you you're selfing, you suffer a lot.

So you've got to remember that we need to be able to take those worlds apart, take that sense of self apart—see them both as actions. You create your sense of that particular world. You're reading the data, you're reading certain things into it, and you're coming out with suffering. So you need to learn how to read the data in a different way, a way that's not going to lead to suffering.

This is one of the reasons why the breath is so useful, because you can step outside of a lot of your thought worlds by stepping into the world of the breath. You can always tap into the breath because it's always here as long as you're alive. And from this perspective you can look at action and its results in a very direct way, because your intentions are right here next to the breath. There's nothing in the body, nothing in the physical world, that's any closer to your mind than your breath. You keep looking away, out there, out there, making assumptions about the world outside and neglecting some very important data right here.

You've probably heard those reports they've had of discovering planets around other stars beside the sun. Well, nobody so far has actually seen any of the planets. They have certain data that indicate regular fluctuations in the star's brightness that would suggest that there's a planet there. But what do they really know for sure in those experiments? Well, they know what they did to get the data they got, they know the raw data, and they know the assumptions and principles they used in interpreting the data. That's all they really know. But the conclusion that there's a planet depends on the assumptions, which may turn out right, may turn out wrong.

But notice how they do that. The actual knowledge they're gained is the knowledge of how they ran the experiment and what kind of data they got—the raw data, the numbers that come out—and then what they did with those numbers. As for whether their conclusions are true, that's another matter. But what they know for sure is what they did, and the raw data they obtained through their doing.

As you meditate, you want to keep your focus that clear, that close. What are you doing with the breath? What are you doing with the mind? What assumptions are you using about the breath and the mind? And what results do you get?

Sometimes you find yourself creating a sense of self around the breath. As you get more and more used to the breath energy in the body, you develop a set series of ways of identifying yourself as the breather, which will create certain

patterns of tension in the body that are really, really tenacious. Some patterns of tension come and go with each breath. Others last a bit longer, but the ones associated with the breather, those tend to last. Which is why it's good to loosen up your conception of what it means to breathe—where the breath is coming in, what needs to be done for it to go out. You can think of the body as a large sponge, with the breath can come in from all directions. You don't have to pull it in through the nose. And breath energy is not something that you have to fight to pull in. It just comes in, goes out. It's all ready to come in if you just let it in. Think of it that way and you find yourself breathing in a different way. That shows you the power of your thought, the power of your assumptions, what they call attention, or *manasikara*, in the texts.

So again, the knowledge here is knowledge of what you're doing and the results you get: that's the basic data, that's where your knowledge is clearest. When you move out away from that and make assumptions, you get more and more into the world of uncertainty. As I said earlier, you need some assumptions to function. Say you're dealing with a table. You learn that if you try to walk through the table, you can't. You bang your shins. So you learn to make some assumptions about the solidity of the table. But exactly how solid is that table? We think of solid mass as being that totally solid, totally filled, but it's not. You've probably read about all the atoms in the table, and how each atom contains a lot more space than hard matter. And even with the protons and electrons: are they really hard? Are they just electromagnetic vibrations? Vibrations of what? Or are they just little distortions in space-time? You could keep on asking questions like this, but for the purpose of walking around the room all you need to know is that if you try to walk through the space between the atoms, you can't do it. You keep bumping up against that sense of solidity.

So which of these assumptions is true? They're all true. The question is which one is useful, and for what purpose? If you simply try to walk across the room and find a table in the way, remember the solidity of the table, so you don't bang your shins. If you want to develop psychic powers and walk through tables, that's another matter.

But the important thing is that you realize all your knowledge of the world comes from your actions and the results you get from those actions. That's the basic data. And for the Buddha, that's the basic data too. It's just that he keeps reminding you: keep looking back at your actions and don't get too sucked into your assumptions, into the worlds you create out of these things, or the different senses of self that you create around these things. Learn to look for the ones that are useful, the assumptions that are useful, for any given purpose. But also learn how to take them apart to remind yourself they are just that, assumptions—so that when they start causing harm or suffering, you can drop them. Realize that

that's not the right time, that's not the right place for those assumptions.

The Buddha's assumptions about what's useful to know, what's not useful to know, parallel very closely his ideas about what's useful to speak about, or what's right to speak about. He says you speak about things that are true. But just because they're true doesn't mean you have to speak about them. You also have to look for whether they're useful. And even that's not enough. You have to look at what's the right time and the right place to speak about these things.

Well, the same thing applies to truths. There are lots of truths about the world out there, just as there are lots of radio waves going through the air right now. Which truths are useful to tune into right now, given your sense of time and place?

This is why the Buddha avoided questions about whether there is or isn't a; whether the world is eternal or not, because he realized that these questions are constructions. There are times when a sense of self is useful. When you want to be responsible, when you want to learn how to delay your desire for immediate gratification for the sake of long term gratification: Those are times when you need a clear sense of self. But there are other times when a sense of self actually gets in the way of a deeper happiness. So you look at your "self" as an activity, something you do, and then you can stop doing it when it's not useful. It's like having different perceptions of the world – the physical world, the psychological world, whatever worlds you are involved with: Tune in to the frequency that's helpful right now, and let the other ones go.

This is why we focus on the breath, because the breath is an area where you can establish an awareness that can begin to see these activities: how does the mind create a sense of self, how does it create a sense of world, what are the actual data that it's got right here, what are the assumptions that it builds things out of? When you're with the breath, you can see these things a lot more easily, because the breath is one of the building blocks from which these things are created. The way you manipulate the energy in your body is going to determine how you identify yourself, along with sense of the world you inhabit. If the energy in your body's really uncomfortable, whatever world you've got out there is going to feel confining. But if you can breathe through it, you can learn to walk through those uncomfortable worlds, dissolve them away.

This doesn't mean that you can create anything you like out of anything at all. The results of your past actions place some limits on the realities you can create in the present. But when you stick with this level of: "Just what are you doing, and what are the results?" that's when you stay closest to the truth. That's when you see most clearly what the possibilities are. What, at the present moment, is the most skillful way to interpret your experience of reality? What can you shape, what can you not shape? When you keep things on this level, you find

you can deal with reality, shape your reality, in a much more skillful and beneficial way.

Practicing Your Scales

October 19, 2006

Developing skill as a meditator is very similar to developing skill as a musician. You start out with the scales—say you're learning the piano—and you want to play beautiful music, but they have you playing these dumb scales and it can be pretty boring. But if you don't stick with the scales, you can't play the music. Over time, as you develop your ear, you begin to realize that there really is a skill to running your fingers up those notes. One of the signs of a really good pianist is his ability to make his runs sound like water, totally effortless—and yet a lot of effort goes into getting there.

It's the same with the meditation. Meditation is work, and there's a lot of grunt work in just getting the mind to settle down and stay still. It's important that you not get bored by it. You sit here with the breath and sometimes it seems like it's the hardest place to stay. The mind is off someplace else, and you've got to pull it back. It stays for a breath or two, and then it's off someplace else again. You've got to pull it back. It's the pulling back that's an important part of the meditation. That's mindfulness and alertness in action. That's directed thought and evaluation in action. Directed thought means just keeping your thoughts with the breath. In the process of strengthening those qualities in the mind, that's when you develop the foundation for good concentration practice.

So there are two ways of meditating. One is just sitting here hoping that you'll hit the lottery, because there are times when things just come together on their own. But that can get frustrating, just wondering what tonight's meditation lottery is going to be like. Are you going to come in first, are you going to come in last? There's no skill there at all. The other way of approaching it is to realize there's work to be done. It may not be fun, but keep reminding yourself that this is how good meditation is built. This is how you develop an understanding of the mind, by understanding that process of how the mind slips off.

It's really amazing. The mind can create all kinds of thought worlds for itself. How does it do that? How does it conduct its discussion of where it's going to go, how it's going to get there? And then how does it cover all that up, so you don't notice it? It all seems to happen just on its own, but if you can see into that, you learn an awful lot about the mind. You learn about ignorance, for one thing, which is the big cause of suffering. You learn about craving: What does the mind crave as it's creating these worlds? It's craving pleasure. It can be sensual pleasure: the idea of thoughts of beautiful things, thoughts of nice-sounding things, so on

down the line. Or it's craving a sense of identity that comes in with this, when you're in the world—you're functioning in a world here—fighting off annihilation, you fear that if there are no thoughts in the mind, the mind is just going to disappear, your awareness is going to disappear. As long as you're thinking and knowing the results of your thoughts, you know you exist. And there is the potential for happiness there. We learn at a very early age that by developing a sense of self, we can use it to provide for pleasure in one way or another. If we were deprived of that sense of self—and this is why so many of us resist the idea of letting go of that sense of self—we'd feel that we'd be deprived of our potential for pleasure, or of the sense of self that's experiencing the pleasure. The craving for this kind of identity is called craving for becoming.

So just in this process of the mind creating thought worlds, you see a lot about ignorance and craving, and all the other factors of dependent co-arising. You watch them in action. It's all happening right here. But instead of having to memorize the lists of dependent co-arising, the best way to learn about these things is just to get your hands dirty, deal with the causal chains that go on in the mind, and learn how to cut them. You'll find that you cut them in different spots depending on how quickly you notice what's going on. This way you learn about the mind. You learn about the processes in the mind in the same way that you learn about eggs by cooking with them; or you learn about a piano by sitting down and playing it, seeing what you can get out of it, what kind of sounds, what kind of satisfaction.

So it's important, as you sit down and meditate, that you realize you're not here just for stress relaxation, stress reduction, or for chilling out. There is work to be done. This is your concentration work, as Ajaan Lee called it: the directed thought and evaluation, keeping your mind with the breath and learning to watch it, to see which ways of breathing help keep you there with the breath, alert and mindful; which ways of breathing make your restless. You learn this through the evaluation, i.e., evaluating times when the mind gets restless and wanders off. Go back and say, "Okay, gotta try something else." You've got to be willing to learn, and it can be frustrating. Any learning experience involves some pain, some effort and frustration, and your ability to deal emotionally with the frustration is what's going to see you through.

So learn how to give yourself pep talks. You have to keep yourself up for the practice. This is why there are times when it's useful to reflect on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. What kind of person was the Buddha who found this path of practice? Everything indicates that he was an extremely truthful person, very realistic, always willing to learn. And he taught purely out of compassion. After his awakening, he didn't need anything from anybody. If there wasn't enough food to keep his body going, he would be perfectly happy to die, because

he'd already found a deathless happiness. So the fact that he kept the body going, kept having to deal with people forty-five years, was a total act of compassion.

And the Dhamma he taught, as they say, was totally heartwood. In other words, there wasn't a lot of rhetoric, a lot of unnecessary teachings. He focused on the big issue in life: Why is there suffering? Why do people create suffering for themselves when they want happiness? What can they do to learn to put an end to that suffering? And he focused on that issue in a way that's still very relevant thousands of years later.

As for the Sangha, he instituted an order where people live totally on gifts. The Buddha's teaching was a gift. The way the Sangha is arranged, monks live on gifts. They don't sell the teaching, they don't have to raise kids, meet mortgage payments, all the other things that would crimp their style of really being true to the Dharma. You look at the stories in the *Theragatha* and *Therigatha*, telling of the monks and the nuns struggling with their meditation, and some of them were in a lot worse places than you are right now. And yet they were able to gain awakening. So that gives you encouragement that it can be done. Not just amazing people like the Buddha who can do it, all kinds of people can do it.

When you reflect on these things, it gives you encouragement for the practice. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha also prefaced meditation practice with practicing generosity and observing the precepts. As you follow the Buddha's teachings in ways that are simpler and easier to follow and see the results that come, it gives you confidence in the teaching: that even though some of the instructions may seem counterintuitive, they work. When you come to the practice fortified by these practices and fortified by your understanding of where this teaching came from, that can help get you over the dry periods when all you seem to be doing is dragging your mind back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, up and down the notes of the piano.

But that sense of confidence has to be augmented also by your willingness to be observant. There's a book in our library on learning how to swim. It's there not because the monks are planning to swim, but because it describes the learning process so well. It talks about how to practice swimming, and the principles apply to any kind of skill that when you're practicing. You don't just go through the motions or put in the time. You have to observe what's the most efficient way of getting through the water. How do you hold your head, how do you watch your stroke to see how you can make your stroke more efficient, so you can use less energy and at the same time go faster, go longer? It's the same way with working on those scales: What's the most efficient way of holding your hands, your arms, your torso to get the best-sounding notes out of the piano? This way, what in the beginning is a very effortful process really does become effortless as you streamline your understanding of what you are doing.

It's the same with the meditation. You find that you have to learn how to streamline your understanding of what it means to keep the mind focused. You start out by basically doing too much: You tense up the body, you engage all kinds of other parts of the mind to try to keep the mind here, and yet you can't maintain that amount of tension. The mind is sure to slip off. Then you try to have no effort at all, and of course it's going to slip off again. What you've got to do is notice, "Which part of the effort is necessary, which part is not? Where's the excess energy that's being expended on this that's making it more difficult than it has to be? What's the most efficient way of staying with the breath? What's the most efficient place to focus? The most efficient way of understanding the breath that helps you stay there so that the amount of effort you put into each moment of meditation is totally possible, totally sustainable? That way you really do develop a sense of ease with being with the breath. So you've got to be observant.

It's in this way that directed thought and evaluation eventually lead to a sense of ease, even a sense of rapture, and the mind can really settle down. Because it's not just a matter of forcing, but it's also a matter of understanding what you're doing and looking through that lens of where's the unnecessary stress, where's the unnecessary amount of effort that's being expended? When is the effort too much, when is too little, when is it just right?

This is why only so much of the meditation can be taught in terms of words saying, "Do this, do that," the technique they tell you to do. A lot of it has to come from your own input, your own willingness to observe, to learn from your mistakes. The process is not necessarily pleasant, but it's the only way to learn. And it has the advantage that it develops your powers of perception, your powers of discernment while you do it.

So just as when you learn how to play the scales well, you're learning a lot of the other skills you are going to need to play music well, in the same way when you learn how to keep the mind with one object in spite of all those other temptations to create worlds that you want to inhabit, you're learning the precise skills that are needed to get the mind to settle down. You're learning the skills that enable you to understand the workings of the mind. This is what's meant by that saying that the path and the goal are not different. In other words, in doing the path well, you find right there in the doing of the path that the goal starts to appear.

So don't just put in the time, saying, "I hope I win the lottery this time when the results will come on their own." You've got to watch, you've got to observe, you've got to be willing to learn. Even if it means going back and relearning the steps that you think that only beginners have to do, everybody has to learn these things many times over. And the more attention you pay to them, the more lessons you learn.

Feeding Frenzy: Dependent Co-arising

October 23, 2006

The Pali word for the worlds we create in the mind is *bhava*, which literally means becoming. We keep creating these worlds. And if you look at dependent co-arising, you see that they're based on two things. The immediate prerequisite is clinging, *upadana*; and clinging in turn is based on craving, *tanha*. But both of those words have another meaning. The word for clinging can also mean feeding, taking sustenance; and the word for craving means thirst. The mind is thirsting for things, and so it latches on to the five aggregates and tries to feed off them. Form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, and sensory consciousness: These are the things we feed on.

When we're meditating we're trying to create a good *bhava*, a good place for the mind to stay in the present moment. If you create a world for yourself that maintains its reference to the present, then it's a lot easier to see what that world depends on in the present as well. In other words, you can see the process of thirsting and feeding as it's happening. That enables you to see through the process, so that you don't get misled by the worlds you create.

When you create worlds of the past and future, though, you have to block out large parts of your present awareness in order to stay focused on those little worlds. That's why they're not helpful in the meditation. They're helpful only to the extent of enabling you to remember things you did in the past or anticipate in the future that help focus you back on the present. In other words, you can remember the times when you were mindless, not very alert, and you can reflect on the damage it caused. Or you can reflect on the dangers that await you in the future if you're not mindful and alert. This kind of thinking is helpful because it motivates you to get back to the present moment to develop your powers of mindfulness and alertness right now.

But if you want to see these processes in action, you've got to watch in the present moment. So you create the world out of the breath, your inner sense of the body. Take the sensations you feel in the legs and the arms, etc., and try to fashion them into a basis for concentration, a place where the mind can stay, that you can take as your dwelling. The sense of ease and fullness you can develop through the breath can help to alleviate your thirst. It gives you something good and nourishing to feed on.

The texts actually talk about feeding on rapture. In the midst of a world of

hungry people, the Buddha said, we feed on rapture like the radiant gods. And he's not just talking about hungry in the sense of hungry for physical food. If you look at what's going on in the world, if you read the newspapers and news magazines, you see what people are doing from their sense of psychological hunger, and it's not a pretty sight. So when we say that in the midst of hungry people, we're feeding on rapture like the radiant gods, it's not a selfish or narrow pleasure. We're trying to get ourselves out of that feeding frenzy.

This process of psychological feeding is a process we have to understand in the mind: How does this happen? The Buddha says that there are four ways of clinging or feeding inside. One is simply feeding on sensual desire. You can think about situations you'd like to have in your life that would make you feel pleasant, that you would derive some pleasure from. You can think about times in the past when you had pleasures, or about pleasures you anticipate in the future. And the mind feeds off of that. There's also feeding on views, clinging to views. Then, as you've probably noticed, there's a strong sense of me or mine around the clinging, feeding on the identity you build around your views. "I'm the person who has the right views; I'm the person who understand things better than other people; my take on things is right." And there's feeding on certain ways of doing things, your habits and practices, your particular way of doing things that you feel is the right way of doing things, in and of itself.

Now, some of these forms of food are actually part of the path. You need to have views for the path, you need to develop certain habits and follow certain practices as part of the path. And you need to develop a certain sense of yourself as capable of following the path. The Buddha doesn't criticize these things, at their proper time and place. What he does criticize is feeding on these things as ends in and of themselves.

And why does the mind feed on these things? Because it feels empty without them. Sometimes it feels lost without them, deprived of its bearings. We create our bearings for ourselves through our views, through our ways of doing things. What it comes down to is that we think we need these things for our happiness. Without them, we feel lost. These are our means—we think—for obtaining pleasure. These attitudes are based on thirst: the thirst for sensuality, the thirst for becoming, or the thirst to destroy what we've got. But all these things are motivated by a desire for happiness, by a desire for wellbeing. The thirst in turn is conditioned by feelings of pleasure or pain or neither pleasure-nor-pain, a neutral feeling. And these come from sensory contact.

So one way of understanding the processes in the mind is try to trace them back: Exactly what contact triggered them? Was there a thought? Was there a sound? Was there an idea that suddenly triggered you into creating these worlds? That's one thing you've got to look for: What are the triggers? Sometimes, you

find, the triggers can be very small. But dependent co-arising digs deeper than that. It says that the issue is not just the contact. We come to sensory contact with a lot of preconceived notions, a lot of attitudes ready to pounce on things. This is why contact is not the beginning of dependent co-arising. Prior to contact you've got the senses, and prior to the senses you've got name and form. Name and form are crucial here, particularly name, for it includes feelings, perceptions, intentions, attention, and the contact among these things in the mind.

This is why the Buddha focuses the practice of the path right here, at the processes of name. You've got to change your intention. You've got to change the way you understand things, which things you pay attention to, which things you ignore. Our usual approach for happiness is that you identify with certain things: your sense of who you are, who's going to benefit from these efforts you're making to create happiness, and exactly what things you have under your power, under your control, that can be used to create that happiness. That's all an issue of attention: how you attend to things, how you look at them, what your perspective is, what questions you ask. And that big question, the question of "I"—"Who am I? Do I exist? Do I not exist?"—that's a constant question, and we're always coming up with different answers. And because that question eats at us, we try to create an identity to stuff into its mouth. But you can learn to stop feeding on it if you can keep reminding yourself that that's not the issue. The issue is simply what can be done to lead to happiness—which sometimes requires a sense of self, but sometimes doesn't.

This is why right view is the beginning of the path, because it focuses particularly on the most skillful way of attending to things. Once you've got a skillful way of attending to things, that changes your intentions. So the focus of your attention should be to understand: "What is the cause of suffering? What are the causes for the end of suffering? If I see myself doing something that leads to suffering, how can I stop? If I see that there are states of mind that lead to an end to suffering, how can I encourage them? How can I develop them?" Those are intentions that you've got to nourish. Otherwise, when the usual triggers for craving and clinging or thirst and feeding come along, you go right back to your old feeding patterns.

So to help strengthen the new way of giving attention, or the new way of developing intentions, the Buddha has you develop certain perceptions. You've probably heard of the three characteristics, but it's interesting to note that the term "three characteristics" doesn't appear in the Pali Canon. The Buddha talks about *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*, but he doesn't use the word for characteristic—*lakkhana*—to go along with them. He uses the word perception or mental label: *anicca-sañña*, *dukkha-sañña*, *anatta-sañña*. You learn to label things as inconstant, stressful, not-self. The other word he connects with them is

anupassana, or contemplation: *aniccanupassana*. To contemplate is to look for these qualities in your experiences. In particular, you look at the raw materials that you ordinarily use to build your sense of yourself, to build your sense of the world, to see how they're inconstant. When the raw materials are inconstant, how are you going to build anything solid out of them? It's like building a house out of frozen meat. The meat seems solid, you can stack it like bricks, but it's going to melt. Who would want to live in a house like that? It's stressful. It's asking for disaster.

So you look for the stress inherent in trying to find happiness in things that are inconstant. When you see the raw materials as stressful, ask yourself: "What can I build out of stressful things that would really provide true security?" And when you see that they're not totally under your control, when they're *anatta*, what sense of reliable self could you build out of these things? You can build a temporary sense of self, and there are times when you need that, but ultimately it doesn't give the satisfaction you want. That's because these thought worlds, once you've set them going, start doing things on their own; they have a logic of their own, which you can't always anticipate. So how can you trust them?

These are the factors the Buddha has you focus on—attention, intention, and perception—so that when you catch the mind jumping at the opportunity to build a thought world, you can ask yourself: "Why am I doing this? What am I going to get out of it?" You look at the raw materials and you see that they're not the sort of things you could build anything reliable out of. Then you look at your motivation: "Why are you doing this? What do you want out of this?" You start asking the Buddha's questions: "Does this activity lead to suffering or does it lead away from suffering?" These are the things you've got to keep in mind.

One way of doing that is to develop a good solid foundation here in the present, so that it's easier to stay in the present. The longer the mind stays in the present, the easier it is to be mindful and alert. The more mindful and alert it is, the more clearly it can see these processes as they're happening.

Dig down a few more steps into dependent co-arising, and you come to fabrication. Fabrication comes in three kinds: bodily, verbal, and mental. Bodily fabrication is the breath; verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation; and mental fabrication is feeling and perception. When you're focused on the breath, thinking about and evaluating the breath, you've got all these things right there. You've got the breath, you've got yourself thinking and evaluating the breath, and you've got the feelings of pleasure and pain that come from the breath, along with perceptions that keep you focused both on the breath and on the pleasures or the pains that come from the breath. When you learn to look at things in these terms and can maintain this world, you're in a much better position to watch the process of how the mind creates other worlds. When it

forgets, when it tries to block out this world of the present, that's the ignorance that sets those other thought worlds into motion.

So you've got to keep reminding yourself stay here, stay here, stay here. Try to get as interested in the breath as you can. Try to understand: What is this bodily fabrication, this breath energy, anyhow? How does the in-and-out breath relate to the sense of energy in the different parts of the body? How can you create a sense of ease here that helps to satisfy you, that helps get rid of that hunger to go out and create other places, other worlds to go foraging in? The greater the sense of fullness you've got here—the fullness that comes from learning how to relate properly to the breath—the more you can cut through the hunger, the thirst, that would force you to create other worlds of being, other worlds of becoming.

So when you look at dependent co-arising, it's not just an abstract exercise. It actually explains a lot of the reasons why the Buddha teaches meditation the way he does, why he tended to teach breath meditation more than any other kind of meditation, and why the path begins with right view. Right view helps redirect this causal process away from the ignorant clinging and thirst that ordinarily we feed on—or that we try to feed on, trying to find some satisfaction—and focuses it in a direction where it provides more satisfaction, a greater sense of fullness.

Dependent co-arising not just a map about abstractions; it's actually a map of your feeding frenzy. And even though the map has lots of factors that even the Buddha admitted are all entangled, it does make one clear and simple point: When contact hits, it's not just making a mark on a blank slate or a passive mirror. The mind is already primed to go looking for food even before contact happens; when we encounter contact, our main question is whether we can eat it. This is why we have to meditate: The causes for suffering are inside. And this is why the Buddha has us focus attention on our intentions, perceptions, and views, because as long as we're ignorant of these things, that ignorance keeps driving our feeding frenzy

Which is why dependent co-arising is also a guide to what you can *do* to help abort this process of constantly creating unsatisfactory feeding worlds in the mind, worlds that lead to suffering, worlds that lead to stress. It teaches us new feeding habits. When we learn how to feed on the breath, we don't have to create the different identities that need to go out and engage in a feeding frenzy on other people. And it's good not just for us, but also for everyone around us.

So develop a taste for the breath. Learn how to be a connoisseur of your breathing. When you learn to feed here, you really develop the various strengths of the mind—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—that can strengthen it to the point where ultimately it doesn't need to feed anymore. And that's a great gift right there, both to yourself and to

everyone around you.

Goodwill All Around

November 2, 2006

Every evening before the meditation, we chant the four brahmaviharas. Actually just chant the words that are meant to be conducive to these sublime attitudes. And they are meant to remind you that it's good to actually cultivate these attitudes as part of your practice. They are the context for what we're doing, thoughts of goodwill. If the Buddha's teachings weren't based on a motive for goodwill, he wouldn't have focused on the issue of suffering, the issue of stress. He wouldn't have focused on the question of how to put an end to suffering and stress as the primary point of the Dharma. So we have to assume that that was the underlying motive, both for his teaching and for the practice of his teachings. That's what we are doing right now, we are looking for an end of suffering, trying to find a true happiness.

So cultivate that attitude. May I be happy. May I be truly happy, with the emphasis on the truly because that places some demands. Ordinary happiness, the pleasures that come from eating and sleeping and having fun aren't all that hard. There is no need to sit for a whole hour, and put up with the pains and other difficulties in meditation if all you want is a quick fix, if a quick fix is good enough. But it's not, because a happiness that turns into something else doesn't turn into happiness. It turns into regret, remorse, actual pain. So we want a happiness that's true, a happiness that lasts.

But think about it. You are not the only one who wants happiness. The people around you want happiness too. If your happiness were to depend on their misery, there's no way they would allow it to keep going. This is why oppressive people have to hire bodyguards, have to have special security forces to protect a very fragile oppressive happiness. And it can never last. So you want a happiness that doesn't take anything away from anyone else, doesn't cause anyone any suffering or harm. And that requires that you look inside. And to keep you looking inside, it's good to remind yourself that you do wish happiness for other beings, other people, because your happiness depends on at the very least you're not causing them any harm. And the world would be a much better place, a lot easier to find happiness, if everybody were looking for true happiness inside.

And so the Buddha advocates spreading thoughts of goodwill in all directions. As they say in the text, first direction, in other words, the east; the second, third, fourth: south, west, north; above and below and all around. Let

your thoughts of goodwill go out in all directions, radiating. The image they give in the texts is of a hornblower, you blow the conch horn (there was a conch shell that they used as a horn). And the sound goes in all directions. It doesn't choose just the east or just the west, goes everywhere. In other words, your thoughts of goodwill should extend not just to your tribe or to your group, but to everybody regardless. Not only human beings, all kinds of beings. Beings you know about, beings you don't know about. Try to make your wish for happiness all-inclusive.

The Buddha recommends this as an attitude to develop as a context for the practice. Because one of the big problems we run across in our meditation is thoughts of greed, anger and delusion. And one way to overcome them, or at least to keep them in check, is to remind yourself you've already wished happiness to these other beings. So why do you want to be greedy for their things? Why do you want to get angry at them? Why do you wish them ill? How can you let yourself be deluded as to what's going to be skillful and what's not if you really want to be happy? In other words, you've got to take the issue of happiness seriously. Most people, you'd think they would take happiness seriously, it's something everybody wants. But if you look at the way people go about trying to find happiness, they don't really think about it. They don't reflect on where true happiness would lie, how it could be brought about. They just go for the quick fix.

So thoughts of goodwill are meant to prevent you from going for that quick fix, remembering that your actions do have results and you want to make sure those results are not harmful. If you run across anyone who you have trouble thinking thoughts of goodwill for, ask yourself why? How would you benefit from their misery? How would there be any benefit from their misery at all? Why are you stingy with your thoughts of goodwill? In other words, the development of goodwill is not meant to be nonreflective, spreading thoughts of cotton candy out in all directions to smother your true feelings about people. They are meant to bring up the issue, is there anybody out there whom you don't feel goodwill for? And if so, why? Then you have to think about it, you have to reflect on it until you realize there's no reason that you would benefit in any way from their suffering.

So this provides the context. Then from goodwill there are the other three attitudes. Compassion, in other words, when you see someone suffering you wish them freedom from that suffering. When you see someone who is happy, you appreciate the fact that they are happy. You don't get resentful, you don't get jealous. Those are natural outgrowths of good will. And then there's equanimity. Because there are going to be cases where you wish for people's happiness, and they're not happy. You try to show compassion for them, and they can't gain freedom, they suffer. Other people who are happy, but then they use that

happiness to abuse other people and there is nothing you can do about it. That's why you've got to develop equanimity. Without equanimity goodwill can be a cause for suffering in and of itself.

So that's when you have to reflect: all beings are the owners of their actions. Some people have karma that's going to force them to suffer for awhile, or at least have bad circumstances. The issue of how they respond to those bad circumstances, that's something they can do something about, perhaps in that way you can help them. In other words, our experience is not totally shaped by past actions, it's also shaped by our present intentions. This applies to other people, applies to you too. There are going to be times when you are in difficult circumstances and you've got to be careful about your intentions, how you respond to those difficulties. There are going to be times when you're in really good circumstances, and again you have to be careful. You can't let yourself be heedless. Other times people, when things are going well—they are wealthy and in a good mood—then they tend to get sloppy, complacent, and that's a cause for suffering right there.

So equanimity is there to remind you, there is this principle of karma that places limitations on what you can do for other people, what you can do for yourself. The purpose of that reflection is to remind you to focus on the things where you can make a difference. Sometimes given the situation, all you can do is just work on how you're reacting to bad circumstances. This is why we have to train the mind. This is how the brahmaviharas lead us into the development of mindfulness and alertness.

There is a passage where they talk about how the brahmaviharas lead to awakening. It's the brahmaviharas imbued with the seven factors for awakening. And the first of those is mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. In this case keeping your basic attitudes, your basic attitude of goodwill in mind. And your knowledge of the principle of action, principle of intention—that you've got to be careful about what you will, what you do, what you say, what you think—got to keep that fact in mind. And then train the mind so it's more and more careful all the time, more mindful all the time. This is why we use the breath or use the word *buddho*, or 32 parts of the body, whatever object we find is easy to keep in mind as a way of getting the mind to settle down. Once the mind settles down, it can see things a lot more clearly. And that's how it can be more careful in what it chooses to do.

This is how the four brahmaviharas or the four sublime attitudes bring us right here. You've got work to do. You've got this mind that keeps churning out intentions, so we've got to be very careful about what those intentions are, which ones we choose to follow, which ones we choose to let go. We've got to keep that in mind. It requires mindfulness, requires alertness. We've got to work on these

qualities, we've got to exercise them. This is why we are sitting here meditating. These are qualities that need strengthening, they need to be made more and more consistent, more lasting.

So as you work with the breath, try to be as quick as possible in noticing when the mind slips off the breath. As soon as you sense that it's slipping, then bring it right back. This is the work of the meditation. This is how mindfulness and alertness are exercised, and with exercise they get stronger just like the body. If you exercise it the right way, if you feed it the right way, you can keep the body in relatively good shape so that it can do what you want it to do. Same with the mind. You feed the mind with these thoughts of goodwill, thoughts of the sublime attitudes and you exercise its mindfulness and alertness. Try to develop its concentration in that way, to develop its discernment into what's going on in the mind: what you choose to do, what you choose not to do. And you gain insight also into this whole question of what does it mean to intend, what is an intention, what is this karma we are doing all the time?

Once you see that clearly, then you are in a much better position to act on that basic motivation for goodwill. You can get the mind to do what you want it to do, and it's strong enough to do what you want it to do. You've got that desire for true happiness. For true happiness you need a well trained mind, a mind that's not afraid to comprehend suffering, let go of its cause, develop the factors of the path, so it can realize the end of suffering. Otherwise even though we all desire happiness, we just keep creating more and more suffering, which is the big irony of life. But it's possible to train the mind. So keep at it. Keep remembering your intention, try to maintain that intention and try to develop the skills that are needed to keep acting on that intention. So you can test whether the Buddha is right: there is an end to suffering, and it can be attained through human effort.

Truths of the Will

November 5, 2006

Someone once said that there are basically two kinds of truths in the world: truths of the observer, and truths of the will. Truths of the observer are things that are true regardless of what you do, that have nothing to do with your ideas about things, what you want, what you don't want. They're just the way of the world. This is what science is all about. And to learn these truths, you can't let your wants get in the way. This kind of truth also describes a lot of things you see day to day.

As for truths of the will, those are things that exist only if you will them into being. They depend on your wants. You decide that this is something you want and you act on it. Say you want to be a concert pianist. That's going to become true only if you decide that this something you really want, that it's worth working on, and you stick with that decision.

When you look at the things that mean the most to us in life, most of them are truths of the will. If you just looked at the world from the point of view of an observer, everything would be pretty pointless. We get born, we grow up, we struggle to survive, and then we die. That's pretty much it. What's the point of all that? Many times you look back on your life and you think of all the things that you fought over, all the things that you worked hard to get, and even if you got them, they just slipped through your fingers. You wonder: What was that all about? Many people look back on their whole lives and that's all they see. "What was that all about? Why all that suffering?"

So if you want to have a point to your life, you have to will it into being. Many of the Buddha's teachings explain why this is so. Your experience of the present moment comes from what? The results of past actions, your current intentions, and the results of your current intentions. That's an interaction between truths of the will and truths of the observer. I.e., you willed things in the past, and then that set into motion certain causal forces, some of which came out in ways you didn't intend. But that's simply because that's the way the world is. That's how causality works. You didn't work the process right. But now you've got your current intentions and they're having an effect right now, and they are going to have an effect on into the future, and they offer you the chance to get it right this time.

So it's up to you to decide: Is there going to be a point to all this? Is there

going to be a direction to all these different intentions? Or are you just going to muck around in your life, and at the end wonder what was that all about? Even the way we suffer comes under these two kinds of truths. There's the truth of the three characteristics which is that anything willed is going to be inconstant, stressful, and not self; anything that's subject to conditions is going to be stressful. But then there's also the suffering that comes from craving, especially unskillful craving.

The first kind of suffering you can't do much about, but you can make a difference with that second kind. This is an area where your will has a lot to say, has a lot of impact if you focus it properly. Putting an end to suffering is a big job, but it is humanly possible. And because it is possible, it's really worthwhile to focus your energies in that direction. That really does give a worthwhile direction to your life. Some people decide they want to be a concert pianist, but then when they become a concert pianist, they find that it's not really as fulfilling as they thought it would be. Someone wants power, gains power, and then abuses it, misuses it, creating a lot of suffering, both for himself and for a lot of other people, which is going to have consequences for a long time down the line.

So for your life to have a point, you have to have a goal and you want to choose a wise goal. This is why the Buddha's seems to be the wisest: a total end to suffering. That requires developing a lot of important qualities in the mind, things you have to will into being. You look at your life and it doesn't seem like there's much opportunity to put an end to suffering, but again you're looking at the things that an observer would look at. The end of suffering is a truth of the will, and if you focus your energies in that direction, it does become possible.

You look at all the verses of the elder monks, elder nuns and a lot of them started out in really miserable circumstances. If you just looked at the facts of their lives, you would have thought, "No chance for this person," and yet somehow they pulled themselves together and decided that this is what they wanted out of life. After all, desire is a factor of the path. It's right there in right effort: You generate desire to develop skillful qualities, you generate the desire to abandon unskillful qualities. That kind of desire is good. You just need to learn how to focus it properly, to create the right conditions.

I was reading a book a while back on analyzing people who had started out their adult lives in really bad shape psychologically, and yet they were able to pull themselves together. Tolstoy was an example. As a young person he looked pretty hopeless, and then he somehow pulled it all together and became a great novelist, an inspiration to a lot of peacemakers. In the book I was reading—it was basically psychotherapy applied to history or psychoanalysis applied to history, which often is a pretty sordid affair. Usually they want to ferret out who had strange sexual desires, and who had strange psychological problems, and just leave it at

that. But in this case the analysis was meant to derive lessons on how is it that some people who start out in really bad shape manage to get it together? That's psychoanalysis applied to history with a real point.

The conclusions were not anything really surprising, but it's important to remember that some of the basic facts of life, the most important ones, are things we tend to overlook. The conclusions here pointed out basically two things: First, in each case the person found someone who really believed in him or her and encouraged him or her to develop skillful qualities. Second, that person had a belief system that emphasized that it really was important to make something of yourself, something of more than just ordinary value.

This is what we have in the Dharma and the Sangha. For the Sangha, you've got people who believe in the worthwhile endeavor, the value of developing skillful qualities and encouraging other people to develop skillful qualities. It creates the right social environment for learning how to mature. And then second, there's the system—the belief system or the values of the Dhamma—that if you develop skillful qualities in your mind, it really does make a difference not only for yourself, but for all the people around you. There is a value to learning how to will, or to intend things in a skillful way. It really does make a difference.

Science can't teach you that. Science tells us that the sun is going to go nova some day, so all your efforts to do something with your life are going to get burned up anyhow. Scientists just are concerned with truths of the observer. We're dealing with truths of the will: What do you want to make with your life? It's possible to make all kinds of things given the raw materials you have.

Often you may find that, given your past kamma, current circumstances are not all that good. But remember several things: One, past kamma is not totally determining what's going to happen in the future; you make decisions from moment to moment. Two, what you see right now is not the sum total or running balance of your kamma account. Think of your past actions more like lots of accounts, or lots of seeds that can sprout and grow and blossom at different times. You may be going through a fallow period right now when not many good seeds are blossoming and some bad seeds are blossoming instead, but that doesn't mean you don't have good seeds in your kamma accounts. So what you want to do is to work right now on what the skillful decision is right now.

As for what's going to come from your past kamma, learn how to treat whatever it is with skill. Associate with people who will encourage you in that direction, encourage within yourself the beliefs and understandings that give value to that way of approaching your life. Because one of the things about truths of the will is that often you see people for whom you think, "There's no chance that this person is going to be a concert pianist; there's no chance that this person is going to make anything out of his or her life." That's what it looks like from

the outside. But a lot of very unlikely people have managed to succeed given the right conditions, as I said, finding the right people to associate with and having a strong belief in the importance of their actions.

This is why faith in the Buddha's awakening is such an important thing, because the Buddha was awakened by what? By his own actions. And it wasn't any special divine quality that he had and we don't have. He simply developed the qualities that he had that we can develop as well.

So look at your life and see what qualities need to be developed in that direction. The traditional list of the perfections is a good one to think about, because it can apply not only to monastic life but also to lay life. And not only to times when you're on retreat like this or times when you're in the monastery, or times when you're meditating, but to all your activities throughout the day. Look at all your activities as opportunities to develop good qualities in your mind, because those of the things that last. The Buddha calls them noble treasures because when you develop good qualities in the mind they stay with you, not only in this lifetime but on into future lifetimes.

What are the perfections? Generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, energy, tolerance or endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, and equanimity. Sometimes when conditions are difficult, you've got to work on the equanimity and the endurance. Other times when opportunities are good, you have to work more on the energy, not to let good opportunities pass you by. When you keep these qualities in mind, you find that you've got the opportunity to practice the Dhamma, to develop qualities that should work in your dealings with other people.

Now you may look at your life and feel that your circumstances are not conducive enough. That's when you may decide that you have to change the circumstances of your life. But the basic conditions you need are the two I mentioned just now. Learn to associate with people who believe, one, in the importance of developing skillful qualities and, two, in your ability to do it. Building on that, hold to the conviction that if you want your life to have a point, you have to give it a point, and you can do that. No matter how discouraging the facts you can observe in your life, don't believe that the observable facts are telling the total story or that your future is already cast in concrete. You constantly have the ability to change your mind, to develop more skillful intentions, to learn from your past mistakes, so that you can bring those truths of the will to fruition.

Taking Responsibility

November 9, 2006

The Buddha once said there are two things that can spark awakening. One is the voice of another, and the other is appropriate attention. This parallels another teaching where he said that the most important external factor for awakening is friendship with admirable people; the most important internal factor again is appropriate attention. In other words, sometimes something you've seen or heard from another person inspires you to think in new ways, to question things in new ways, to look in new ways. And other times you simply start asking questions yourself. The Buddha defines appropriate attention as this ability to put aside fruitless questions and to focus on the ones that are fruitful. As for the voice of another person, that can give you instructions as to what to do, advice for the meditation, and at the same time hopefully raise some questions. But again you've got to filter what those other voices send. Sometimes your filter is good; sometimes your filter is bad.

So you've got to be very careful about how you listen to the Dhamma to make sure that you're filtering it in the right way: getting the points that are useful to you, that will open up new perspectives, that will question some of your basic assumptions. We all come to the practice with assumptions. Some of them are skillful, some of them are not. Some of them we've learned from what we think is the best authority: We've read them in the suttas, we've read them in the writings of great masters from the past. But again, even our reading is filtered through our assumptions. So you have to learn how to question them. This is why it's good to have the voice of someone from outside because things that appear perfectly obvious to us may not appear obvious to them. They may want us to question them.

One of the ways we can fight against delusion in the practice is by getting perspectives from outside. But as Ajaan Lee once said, what's really important ultimately are the questions you learn to ask. Meditation is like a skill. The teacher can teach you the basic techniques. It's like a skill of learning how to weave a basket. The teacher can teach you lots of different weaving patterns, but whether you will weave well or not is up to you: your own powers of observation, learning to look at what you've done and see what needs to be changed, learning how to see the connection between the state of mind that you bring to the weaving and the results that you get. Sometimes it's simply a question of learning to make your fingers more nimble. Other times it's a question of learning to be

more and more attentive to your own actions.

There's no teacher who can tell you, "Okay, do this, this, this, and you're going to get awakened." You can't abdicate responsibility. You have to be responsible for how well you understand the teachings, and for how well you observe what you're doing. Your powers of observation are going to make all the difference in the world. The Buddha didn't claim to invent, say, the different levels of jhana, but he came up with a new idea for how to use them. He tested the idea and found that it worked.

It's in this way that Buddhism is like a science. Sometimes that analogy can be overdone, but there are some important parallels. On the one hand, science is partly an issue of technique: how you go about trying to test a thesis, the proper steps and scientific procedure. But then there's also that wild card part of science: which questions are worth asking. That's not just a matter of technique. Some questions can go unasked for generations until somebody has a crazy idea to start asking a question everybody else thought was too unimportant to ask. And it turns out then though that great discoveries come as a result of asking the new question.

People in the Buddha's time thought that getting into strong states of concentration was an end in and of itself. He mastered their techniques, did what he was told, and found that he still wasn't satisfied with the results. So instead of trying to find someone else to tell him what to do, he realized he had to ask some new questions. He tested other techniques on his own, virtually starving himself with all sorts of austerities for years—six years they say. Then he finally realized that that wasn't working. He had the good sense to ask the question: Might there be another way? That was when he thought of the time he'd been sitting under a tree when he was young, entered the first jhana, and instead of just getting nostalgic about it, he asked another question: Could this be the way to awakening? Notice here that, unlike his earlier teachers, he didn't take the jhana as an end in and of itself. He wanted to explore it as a path. That was a whole new way of thinking about these states of mind. It was because he was able to ask those questions that he ultimately got himself on the path and gained awakening.

So even though the Buddha's teachings are all laid out, it's important to remember how he went about his practice: by asking questions. Because we can hear the teachings, we can understand them, we can think about them, but if you don't start asking questions, nothing happens. It just becomes plain technique without any real insight. This is why Ajaan Fuang always said to observe, to watch. And his attitude when he gave meditation instruction was not, "Just do this and don't think, and come back when you've got guaranteed awakening." He said, "Try this out. If it doesn't work, we can work with it." He wanted you to take responsibility for your actions. He wanted you to take responsibility for your

meditation.

You see this in the teachings of all the great ajaans. Ajaan Mun would sometimes say things in his Dhamma talks, and Ajaan Maha Boowa would listen to them and think about them, because they just didn't make sense. He reports one time coming back to Ajaan Mun and saying, "That point you made in your Dharma talk the other day, I tried to figure out what you meant." And Ajaan Mun kind of smiled and said, "Oh, there's someone who is trying to figure out what I say?" And Ajaan Maha Boowa would give an answer to what he had figured out, and Ajaan Mun wouldn't say whether the answer was right or wrong. In other words, he wanted Ajaan Maha Boowa to be responsible for what he was doing, for the questions he asked, and the answers he got.

You look at the Buddha's path and it's all a matter of questions. He advises Rahula to ask questions about his actions, to ask questions about his intentions. If you plan to do something, ask yourself: What are the results going to be? Are they going to be harmful or not? While you're doing an action, ask yourself: Are the results of what I'm doing right now harmful or not? When the action is done: Were the results harmful or not? Wisdom, he said, starts with that question: What will I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? And when you're meditating, he says, you go to a teacher and you ask questions: How can I get the mind to be more still? How can the mind be focused? How can it be settled down? These are useful questions to ask for the purpose of gaining tranquility. For the purpose of insight the questions are: How should fabrications be regarded? How should they be analyzed?

You get some answers but then again you have to take those answers and apply them in your own practice to see if they work. If they don't work, you come back again. Maybe get some more advice, or else figure out you've got to figure them out on your own. For getting insight, one of the series of questions the Buddha would have you ask is: Is this constant or inconstant? Sometimes you get into very strong states of concentration, and it seems about as solid as anything can be in your experience. You've got to ask: Is it constant or not? And if it's inconstant, is it stressful or not? If it's stressful, can it be taken as yourself? There's a whole series of questions that can lead to insight, and from insight to release.

But the Buddha doesn't throw everything up into the air. He gives you techniques for getting the mind to settle down, to be in a position where it can profit from the questions. You settle in with a sense of well-being, a sense of ease. Then you can start questioning because the mind is in a much better mood to question things. When you're feeling exasperated or beset upon, victimized, you tend not to want to ask questions or not want to question yourself, let's put it that way. Especially when you feel that you've been treated unjustly: That's one

of the strongest senses of self there is in the world. When you're in that position, you don't want to hear any questions about whether you're really justified in your anger or not.

So you need to put the mind in a much better place where it can start asking questions about: where do you like to find your pleasure? This afternoon we talked a little bit about lust. Most of us are very firmly entrenched in lust, and we've got a lot of defenses around it. As the Buddha said, for most of us the only alternative to pain is sensual pleasure. We feel that if we're being asked to give up our attachment to sensual pleasure, we'd have nothing left but pain. One of the purposes of the practice is to show you that there is an alternative. You can get the mind into good strong states of concentration that don't depend on sensual passion.

So there is another alternative, but the Buddha doesn't have you stop there. Once you've attained that alternative, then he has you look back on the other ways you are used to find pleasure. Because for most of us, this pleasure of concentration becomes one more dish on the smorgasbord. We like to have concentration and we like to enjoy our old pleasures as well. But when you get the mind in a good solid state of concentration, you're in a much better position to look back and say, "This pleasure I get from the concentration: How does it compare to, say, the pleasure that comes from lust? That comes from sensual passion? Are the two compatible? Can you have them both, or do you have to give up one for the other?" It's a pretty radical thing, learning how to see that lust is not your friend, learning to look at all its drawbacks. Now you're in a much better place to do that. You can ask questions of all your different defilements: your pride, your anger, your deluded fears.

The whole problem of delusion is that usually you're too deluded to see it. This is why the Buddha has that teaching on the voice of another person or friendship with an admirable person—to help you learn to see new possibilities. For me, meeting Ajaan Fuang was a very radical experience because it opened up a whole door on what was possible in life. There's more to life than just scrambling round for pleasures and then dying. There's more to life than a lot of what my preconceived notions told me was possible.

So this is largely the role of admirable friendship: to open your mind to new possibilities. The teacher is not there just to tell you what to do so that when you simply obey you're going to get guaranteed results. That doesn't give you any insight at all. It just turns you into an automaton, a robot, a computing machine. You put in the data and you get the results. The machine is not responsible for whether the data is any good. It's not responsible for the software; it just does what it's told and doesn't gain awakening. The purpose of the teacher is to suggest new possibilities. Then you have to explore them and learn how to

suggest new possibilities for yourself, because the teacher is not always going to be there for you.

So an important element in training in the meditation is learning how to be responsible for your own meditation, responsible for being a good technician, and also learning to be responsible for asking the unexpected question, being responsible for willing to experiment, and being responsible for learning how to judge the results of your experiment. Because ultimately nobody else can judge those for you.

So reflect on the topic of appropriate attention, this ability to ask questions that give you insight into why there is suffering and how it can be stopped. You've got your laboratory right here: the body and the mind. These things have been showing their truths for who knows how many lifetimes, but you haven't noticed. If you learn to observe, the truths are there. There's nothing mysterious about them. It's simply a matter of learning how to look.

Overwhelmed by Freedom

March 18, 2007

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, I ran into a paradox: I was there because I wanted some freedom, freedom from the issues eating away at my mind. But I found I didn't know how to handle the freedom I had found. This is just conditional freedom. It wasn't the unconditioned freedom that the Buddha was talking about, just the conditional freedom of having a whole afternoon with nothing to do, no duties, no responsibilities. As Ajaan Fuang made clear, my only responsibility was to stay with the breath. And my mind was overwhelmed at the prospect of that kind of freedom: overwhelmed in the sense that I didn't know what to do with it, didn't know if I could handle it—a whole afternoon with nothing to do—and I watched my mind as it was trying to find ways of filling up the time.

This is a common problem we all find as meditators. We think, "If only I had more time to meditate," and then when we *do* get more time to meditate, it's overwhelming. We fill up our days—looking for chores to do, looking for things to read—because we can't face the freedom. Part of us is afraid we'll feel bored with nothing to do but focusing on the breath; nothing to do but sitting and then walking, and then sitting and walking. And part of the fear comes from the sense that we don't know how to measure progress. The mind has this tendency to go up and down, it seems to make some gains and then it loses them, and makes some more gains and then loses them again, back and forth like this. Your mind wants to measure things in terms of what was gained by this hour of effort, the next hour of effort, and yet it doesn't know what to measure. It feels lost and begins to thrash around.

This is where discipline comes in. You have to learn how to discipline yourself not to waste the free time you have. The first thing is to remind yourself: You don't really know how much free time you have. You never know when illness will come, or death: your own death or death of someone else around you, which will cut short your time here. All sorts of things can happen. Crazy people may decide they want to have another war, and it won't be just their own personal war; it'll drag lots of people into chaos along with them. So you don't know how much more time you have before that kind of chaos hits again.

This is why the Buddha's reflections on the world are important. He defines the world simply as your world of sensory impressions, but it's not a monadic little world. It's going to be influenced, it's going to be touched, by other people.

And although he said that reflections about whether the world is finite or infinite, eternal or non-eternal are a waste of time, the reflection on the fact that the world is swept away, does not endure, offers no shelter—that passage we chanted just now—is an important reflection. You have no guarantee how much more time you have here or how much longer social stability is going to last.

In one of the passages that King Asoka singled out as important for Buddhists to keep reflecting on, in the series called “future dangers,” the monk reflects: “I’m young now, healthy now, alive now. Society is peaceful. The Sangha is harmonious. But when these things change, it’s not going to be easy to practice. So while I have the time, I should practice and try to attain that which I haven’t yet attained, to see what I haven’t yet seen, so that when I do face aging, illness, death, social unrest, or a potential split in the Sangha, my mind will still be at ease.” This is what heedfulness is all about: to remind you that you don’t have all the time in the world. You may not even have all the time in a day.

So use these thoughts to focus your mind on the present moment. You’ve got this moment right now. Don’t waste it, because you don’t know how many more present moments you’re going to have. You sit down and think about a whole day with nothing to do, and the mind begins to fill up the day with all of its paisley patterns. So stop that thought right there, and remind yourself that you don’t know how much time you have. What you do know is that you’ve got the opportunity right now to be with this breath.

There’s a famous sutta where the Buddha reminds the monks to be heedful, to reflect on death every day. And not just every day. He asks the monks how often they reflect on death. Some monks say once a day; others say twice a day. Finally he gets to the monks who say, “While I’m eating, I remind myself, ‘If only I get to live as long as it takes to swallow this morsel of food, I’ll have the opportunity to practice the Buddha’s teachings.’” Another monk says, “If only I can live for one more in-breath, one more out-breath, I’ll have an opportunity to practice the Dharma.” The Buddha comments that only those last two monks really count as heedful. Everybody else, he says, is heedless. You’ve got this time to practice but you just throw it away, throw it away, because you spend the time thinking about endless vistas of days, or a whole day here just with nothing to do, no pressures.

Many of us who are used to the pressures of work, of having limited time, who learn to thrive within the confines of those pressures, find that when suddenly the pressure is off, the mind loses its bearings. Your mind, which is normally very active and proactive, becomes passive, loses its direction. This is why the Buddha’s perspectives on karma, his perspectives on time in the world, are an important part of the practice. There are no passages in his teachings that are there just for abstract speculation. They’re all part of the training. He talks

about eons of time, but he always brings the discussion back to the fact that the experience of where you're going to be in those eons of time depends on what you do. And where are you going to see what you do? You see right now; you don't see it anywhere else. Right here and now is where you can see how the mind fashions its realities, how it fashions its worlds.

So you have to be as sensitive and as precise and meticulous as possible in looking into the present moment, having a very strong sense that this is very important right here, right now. It's a rare opportunity even when you have two whole weeks or three whole weeks to do nothing but this. That time passes and when it's gone you don't want to be the sort of person who says, "Gee, I didn't take advantage of it. I got sloppy or careless. All I could think of was filling my time with styrofoam peanuts, shredded paper"—i.e., all the stuff with which we fill up time when we don't know anything better to do.

But here we do have lots of better things to do. The problem is this is one of those jobs where you can't measure your progress with a ruler or a stopwatch. You churn out papers or have projects—it's one of the useful ways we have, especially for the monks, of maintaining our sanity. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if you do nothing but meditate all day, you're going to go crazy quickly. It's for this reason that we try to do our chores meticulously and well. But if you do have chores, make sure they don't occupy your whole day. Have a little time every day for a chore to give yourself something tangible to show yourself something that got accomplished today. As the Buddha noted, the job of wearing away your defilements is like wearing down the handle on an adze—a small ax for carving—that you use every day. You know that over time your use of the adze will wear away the handle, but you can't see it being worn away from day to day to day. But don't let the projects take over. Make sure you have plenty of time to stick with the intangibles.

This is why conviction is such an important part of self-discipline. Even though you may not see it, you know some good is being done each time you bring the mind back to the breath. Each time you try to focus as precisely as possible, you're creating new habits. That's a long-term process, a long-term project. So you have to know how to give yourself pep talks along the way to keep yourself going. You don't want self-discipline just to be the ability to push yourself through drudgery. You want to be able to make the meditation as entertaining as possible, as interesting as possible, as enjoyable as possible, to bring as much enthusiasm as you can to a process which, without the enthusiasm, simply dries right up.

So squarely face the fact that you've got a big project here: all these huge defilements of the mind. But they don't come as an avalanche of huge boulders all at once. They're little tiny things, one by one by one, as they come through

the mind. And they come in lots of different guises. Anger for instance: There's not just one reason why we're angry, which means that when you work through one type of anger it's not going to get rid of all the kinds of anger you may have. But your experience in dealing with one kind of anger will give you some ideas on how to approach other types of anger as well. Anger gets built up from lots of different narratives in the mind, and different narratives will get activated by different events. When you've seen through one kind of narrative—i.e., the way certain events recall a type of relationship you had when you were a child, and you realize that you're not being forced back into the restricted place where you were when you were a child by this new event—okay, you've seen through that particular narrative. But there are many other narratives for anger just as there are many narratives for greed.

So there are lots of these things you've got to learn how to work through. Just because you see through anger once, don't get discouraged when you find anger returning in another guise. Keep reminding yourself that this is a long-term project. There are lots of ins and outs. As the Buddha once said, you look at the animal world and it's all so variegated: all the different kinds of animals, each with its own special little niche, its own coloring, its own peculiar tools and shapes and forms, its own ways of behavior. And yet the human mind is even more variegated than that. So we've got a lot to deal with here. It's not an impossible task, but it does take time. Fortunately we have the time now. So make the most of it. These windows in time won't come all the time. You've got the window right now. Make the most of it.

It's a paradox: discipline leads to freedom because it helps you make the most of your free moments. Without it, everything falls apart. Remember Shackleton's expedition to Antarctica. There were so many times when things looked hopeless, but the men were well disciplined. They knew that if there was any hope at all, it was going to lie in maintaining their discipline. That was what saw them through. Looking back on it, we can see that Shackleton made a lot of wrong judgments, but the discipline of the party got them through even his misjudgments.

So your mind, in the course of the practice, is going to make some false starts. There are times when some issues come up in the mind and they really are worth looking into, but other issues turn out to be distractions. How are you going to know beforehand? You don't know beforehand. But you give things a try.

Your first line of defense as you're practicing concentration should always be: Any other issues that come up are not what you're here for right now. But if they come up persistently, you have to look into them to see why they have such power over the mind, what their drawbacks are, and why you really shouldn't

have to listen to them. Learn how to see through them. That requires getting involved with them for a little while. If you find that getting involved with them is useful, if your involvement helps you understand some deeper issues in the mind, then pursue them. But also learn how to read what's going on in the mind so that you know when it's just turning into a major distraction and all you're doing is reliving old garbage. That's when you have to pull out. Learn how to read those telltale signs, but you can learn the tales told by the telltale signs only from trial and error. We don't like trial and error, but it's the only way you're going to learn about the mind.

So even though there may be false starts and wrong decisions, the element of discipline is what's going to see you through. It's the discipline that makes the most of freedom and actually yields in a higher freedom. You learn through trial and error how to apply that discipline, how to develop that sense of self-discipline. You've got the time now, so do it now. The results may not come instantly, but working on the mind is what you *can* do now. There's no other way it can be trained.

A Refuge from Modern Values

March 20, 2007

There is a passage in the Canon where Ven. Ananda comes to the Buddha and says: “You know, half of this holy life, half of the life of the practice, is to have admirable friends.” And the Buddha says, “Don’t say that, Ananda. Having admirable friends is the whole of the holy life.” Everything in the practice depends on having admirable friends. And the Buddha gives us an example: If it hadn’t been for him as our admirable friend, where would we be? How would we know anything about the noble eightfold path? How would we know anything about the path to the end of suffering?

And the practice unfolds in the context of our friendships, which means that you have to choose your friends well: the people you hang around with, the people whose values you agree with. The problem is that we often pick up the values of the people around us through a process of osmosis, hardly even aware of what we’re doing. We live in a society where everything is measured in terms of monetary worth. It seems normal. We forget how abnormal it can be. How can money be the worth of a person? The worth of a person lies in qualities of mind, the goodness of the heart, the goodness of that person’s actions. There are lots of worthwhile things in the world that really shouldn’t have a price on them.

I remember when we were in India. Sometimes we’d find ourselves out in an Indian village and we wanted some water to wash with or to drink. If we saw a well or a pipe in front of a house, we’d ask the people in the house if we could use their water. They looked at us very strangely. Later we discovered that it was expected that you could just take water. Water was something without a price; you didn’t have to ask permission for it. It was common property. Of course that’s not the way it is now. They want to privatize all our water supplies; people keep finding more ways to make money off of water. And that becomes the norm, because “everybody’s doing it.” So you have to be very careful to choose your “everybody,” because a lot of activities that everybody is doing can cause a great deal of harm.

So the practice of meditation is not just mastering a technique. It’s also learning to pick up the right values. This is why the Buddha created the monastic Sangha. Not only is this a community where the monks and the nuns help one another maintain the right set of values; it’s also a place where laypeople can learn values from the monks and nuns. The fact that the monastics depend on laypeople means that the laypeople need to have close contact with the

monastics. That hopefully causes the values of the monastic life to rub off on the laypeople. The mere example of someone who can live happily on very simple things without a salary, without owning any money at all teaches good lessons to the society at large. It challenges you to look at your values, to look at your life. Which attitudes, which values and ideas that you've picked up from other people really work against your own best interests? It's good to examine those attitudes, because a lot of defilements usually hide behind them.

“Defilement” is one of those traditional Buddhist words that have had trouble finding their way into Western Buddhism. It's a very common word over in Asia. People freely admit that they have defilements, and can talk openly about their defilements all the time. But over here, people don't like to hear about it. This is because we tend to regard our greed, anger, and delusion as our friends. We live in a society where everybody takes it for granted that people are going to be greedy, angry, and deluded, and the society actually is arranged to take advantage of that. It becomes not only the norm but it's also encouraged—as when they tell you that greed is good. I don't know how many times people have complained to me, saying that if you live content with very little, the economy is going to collapse. Well, if the economy is built on greed, anger, and delusion maybe it should collapse. It's causing people to do unskillful things, to think and act in unskillful ways. It's not good for us. You might say, “How can we live otherwise?” Well, have one foot outside of the “real world” so you can step back and look at these things from a more detached perspective—detached in the sense of looking at them in terms of the larger picture.

There's a chant we often chant here: “We are subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation. And I'm the owner of my actions: whatever I've done, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.” The Buddha says that these are things we should all reflect on whether we're lay or ordained. We should reflect on them every day, remembering that our actions have consequences, and the consequences are determined by the quality of the intention that goes into the action. Once you take this perspective, you can look at the things you “have to do” to get ahead: If they're done out of greed, anger and delusion, you'd be better off not doing them because they have long term consequences down the line.

Of course that calls into question the idea of “getting ahead.” It's easy for us to look at people in other cultures—the things they do to get ahead, the things they value as signs of social status—and to see them as kind of strange. The insignia, for example, that go with wealth and power: If you're from outside the culture, and look at how people clamor after those ribbons and fans and medals, it's all pretty bizarre, and not a little sad. Well, remember that our signs of status seem bizarre and sad to them. So learn to have that kind of attitude toward the

culture in which you live. Step outside of your culture and realize how bizarre it is.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha encourages people to go off into the wilderness, because it's a very natural way to pull out of the frenzy and rat race of daily life. Ask yourself: "Do you want to be in a race with a lot of rats?" You see this reflection filling the literature on wilderness, yet it often happens that people who go into the wilderness and think about this for a while, don't have the skills required to maintain that wilderness attitude when they return into society. So this is one of the things we try to cultivate through the meditation: the ability to carry a sense of an inner patch of wilderness, a sense of separate center. You stay with your center regardless of what's happening outside. That gives you your separate perspective where you can step back and look at things. This is why it's so important to develop this as a skill.

We were talking today about the concept of refuge as a home for the mind. It's also your own internal wilderness. It's good to have a wilderness home in the midst of the city, in the midst of all the frenzy of modern life—to have that place where you can step back even while you're in the midst of people whose values aren't really helpful in training the mind.

So the values and the techniques of meditation go together. This is why it's so important to work on this skill until you really have it mastered—so that no matter what, you can stay with the meditation. This is why your values, the reasons you come to the meditation or your motivation for meditation, have to be more than just relaxation or stress reduction. You have to do it for your sanity, for your safety, knowing that there are dangers out there. This is why the Buddha stressed heedfulness as the basic mind state underlying all skillful qualities. "Heedfulness" means a very alive sense of the dangers that await you out there, all the stupid things you can do if you fall in line with general run-of-the-mill values. It also means having a sense how crucial it is to develop the ability to step back so you don't run with the herd mentality, don't get caught up in the stampede.

It's dangerous out there because it's dangerous in here. The mind so quickly picks up through its greed, anger, and delusion the ideas out there that foster greed, anger, and delusion. If our minds were truly pure, if you really did have that wonderful Buddha nature, that deep down inside is so true and good, this wouldn't happen. It would be incorruptible. But the mind is corrupted, it is defiled, so what kind of Buddha nature is that? How can you depend on it? We like to think that we're basically pure yet corrupted by society, but if we were basically pure we wouldn't be corruptible.

So you do have to take a jaundiced eye not only to values out there but also to these false friends inside who are here only to cheat you. They're good only in word; they flatter and cajole; and they lead you to ruinous fun, like we repeated

in the chant about false external friends just now. You've got to protect yourself from those dangers as well. They're a fifth column: Mara's armies inside you.

So realize that you have to be very careful about who you choose as your friends both inside and out. Sit down with yourself and ask, "What do you really value in life? What really is important in life?" Then develop the qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency needed to give yourself the refuge where you can stay true to your values and develop a sense of genuine security, genuine well-being. That way your values help the techniques of meditation, and the techniques help your values. So look for admirable friends. When you find them outside, follow them. If you can't find them outside, the Buddha says, go alone, but try to maintain your internal friends wherever you go.

Two Kinds of Middle

March 28, 2007

This path we're following is called the Middle Way, and it's important that you understand that there are two kinds of "middle": One is the midpoint on a continuum; the other is a point off the continuum entirely. And the Buddha teaches both.

For example, in terms of the effort you put into the practice: You know the story of the monk with very tender feet. He was doing walking meditation so much that his feet started to bleed and he began to have thoughts of disrobing. The Buddha, reading his mind, levitated and appeared right in front of him. Don't you wish you had the Buddha coming to appear right in front of you while you're meditating? It would make things a lot easier. In this particular case the Buddha asked him, "Back when you were a lay person, were you skilled at playing the lute?"

The monk answers, "Yes."

"What happened when the string was too tight? Did it sound good?"

"No."

"When it was too loose, did it sound right?"

"No. You have to tune the string so it's just right."

"In the same way," the Buddha said, "you tune your effort, the level of energy you put into the practice, to what you can handle. Then you tune all the other faculties of your practice to that." It's like tuning a lute, you tune one string first and then you tune the other strings to that first one. You tune your conviction, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment to the level of effort you can manage. In that way your practice stays in tune.

In this case, the middle is a midpoint on a continuum. You can slide up or down the continuum and it's not all that difficult. The question of how much you push, how much you pull back: There are just two directions to choose from.

But with the other kind of continuum, there are more directions, more dimensions. Take the noble eightfold path. The Buddha teaches it as middle that avoids sensual indulgence and self torture. This doesn't mean that you lead a middling life halfway between torture and indulgence, torturing yourself a little bit and allowing yourself a little pleasure. The path actually involves a very intense level of pleasure in right concentration. But it's a different kind of

pleasure, and you relate to it in a different way from how you normally relate to pleasure. That takes it off the continuum.

To begin with, it's a pleasure based not on the pleasures of the senses, but on the ability of the mind to settle down and be still. This is off the continuum of sensual pleasure and sensual pain. It's a pleasure that comes simply from inhabiting the form of your body, being with the breath, the breath energy all around the body, all through the body, experiencing it from the inside. That's form. It's also a pleasure that can come as you learn how to direct the energies in the body—finding out where they're flowing well, where they're not flowing well, what ways you think about the energies that help them to flow better, where you focus your attention to loosen up the tension. That's a pleasure that doesn't depend on sensory input or sensual desire. It's a different kind of pleasure and, as a result, a much clearer pleasure. The mind is less intoxicated by it because you're not harming anyone. The pleasures where we have to intoxicate ourselves are the ones where the mind intentionally puts blinders on itself.

You've probably had the experience of lusting after somebody. If you step back and looked at the lust, you'd realize you're focusing only on a few things in a narrow narrative that includes a few details of the other person's body—and your body—but the narrative excludes an awful lot. After all, there's an awful lot of oppression that goes on even in a consensual sexual relationship, but we don't like to think about it, so we just block it out. There's also the whole question of what that person contains right under the skin, what *you* contain right under *your* skin. Is that really worth lusting for? Again we block that out. So many of our sensory pleasures are just that: a blocked out, narrow, confined range of view. That's why they're intoxicating.

But the pleasure of concentration isn't intoxicating in that way. You can get attached to it, but it's putting you in a position where you can see the attachment clearly and learn to let go. But notice that it's off the continuum. It's not halfway between sensual pleasure and sensual pain. It's something of a different order entirely. And the way you relate to it is different as well. This is important. We tend to simply receive our pleasure: *rab*, is the word in Thai. We're on the receiving end of the pleasure; we're on the receiving end of the pain. We're the ones who are being afflicted by the pain. We're the ones who are allowed to enjoy the pleasure. That puts us on the passive side. When it's pain, we're the victim. When it's pleasure, we're the person enjoying the pleasure. We identify ourselves as the taster, the enjoyer, the experiencer.

But with the path, that's not the relationship you want. You want to learn how to use the pleasure of concentration as a tool. This means you're able to create a sense of pleasure with the breath. You're not just going to wallow in the pleasure, because that takes you back to your old ways of getting intoxicated with

pleasure. You've got to think of it as: "This is something I've got to work with. What can I do with this pleasure?" First, you can work on areas of tension or tightness in the body. Get yourself into the body. Inhabit it fully. Then start asking yourself: "Where am I in the body? What fabrications have I built up around that sense of where I am in the body?" You can begin to take these things apart. In other words, the pleasure becomes a basis for understanding a lot of the mind's strange perceptions, replacing them with new perceptions, trying out new perceptions to see how they fit.

This is how you get off your normal continuum. Ask a different question. Look at things from a different way. Get outside the box. Pleasure is something you can actually use as a tool rather than something you simply experience or don't experience, something you run after as much as you can and then, when you've got it, you just hold onto it. Here we're learning how to be with it, but not just simply to grasp at it. We learn to use it. So when pleasure comes up in the meditation, don't let yourself lose focus. Don't abandon your focus on the breath to wallow in the pleasure. Think of the pleasure as something you're going to use as a tool. And then start using it as a tool. This way you develop the mindfulness that keeps you from getting waylaid by the pleasure, carried off by the pleasure. And it becomes part of the path.

There's another version of the Middle Way where the Buddha points out that saying *all exists* is one extreme; *all doesn't exist* is another extreme. He teaches the Middle Way: dependent co-arising. This is another case where the Middle Way is off the continuum because, as he said, most people think in terms of a polarity. Things either exist or they don't exist. The word "all" here covers all the senses and their objects. Basically the question leading to this polarity is: is there something really existing there or are we just experiencing just phantasms? Is there something really there behind the sight, the sound, the smell, the taste? Is there nothing behind the sight, the sound, the smell, the taste? And the Buddha says, try to drop both.

Where does that put you? It puts you in a position where you can actually experience what's arising and passing away. He says look at it as just that: arising and passing away. As you see things arise, the idea that they don't exist doesn't occur to you. As you see them passing away, the idea that they do exist doesn't occur to you. You put yourself in a position where existing and not existing are not the issue. The issue then turns into what? It turns into the fact that there's stress arising and passing away. Whatever arises, it's a form of stress. Whatever passes away, it's just a form of stress.

Once you look at your experience in those terms, then the imperatives of the four noble truths kick in. Where there's stress, you've got to comprehend it. In other words, you look at your experiences, not with the question of "Is there

something behind there? Is there nothing behind there?” “Behind there” is not the issue. The issue is what you’re directly experiencing. Try to comprehend that. Then you can see the craving that causes the stress to rise and pass away. Learn how to abandon that. Develop the path, so that you can realize the ending, the cessation of stress. This is another case where the Middle is off the continuum. It requires that you think in new ways.

So when you find yourself with problems in the meditation, sometimes it’s simply a matter of sliding back or forth on the continuum: heavier effort, lighter effort; more analysis, less analysis; more quiet, less quiet. But there are other times you have to get off the continuum. That requires that you use your ingenuity, to think outside the box, think off the continuum. This is why some teachers like to use paradox in their teachings, the unexpected answers. Like the rhetorical question Ajaan Chah asked, “What is the mind?” His answer: “The mind isn’t ‘is’ anything.” The answer’s not grammatical, but the fact that it’s not grammatical means you have to stop and think. What does it mean? “The mind isn’t ‘is’ anything.” Or another way of translating it: “The mind isn’t a what.” Teachers answer in this way to alert you to the fact that sometimes we ask the wrong questions. That’s why they’ve got to frame the answer in a new way.

So when you find yourself sliding back and forth on a continuum—the extremes don’t work, the middle part of the continuum doesn’t work—maybe you’ve got to get off the continuum. Look at what questions you’re asking. Maybe it’s time to reframe the question, so you can get that other kind of middle: the middle that avoids both extremes and avoids even the middle point between the extremes, because it’s off the continuum entirely.

Shoot Your Pains with Wisdom

April 3, 2007

There's a passage where the Buddha describes how a wise person and a foolish person differ in the way they react to pain. They both feel pain. Awakened people get sick, they grow ill, and they die just like regular people. But they react in a different way. The foolish person, when struck by a pain, reacts in a way that adds more pain. The classic analogy is of being shot by one arrow and then turning around to shoot yourself with another arrow—although it's always struck me that the classic image is too weak. Actually, you shoot yourself with your whole quiver. Whatever arrows you've got, you shoot yourself with them all, and no wonder you suffer. The wise person, however, doesn't fire those extra arrows at all.

What this means is that when you find yourself suffering over something, you've got to look at which arrows are coming from outside and which ones are the ones you're shooting. This comes down to a fairly abstract principle that the Buddha mentions in another passage—that when you experience a feeling of any sort, pleasant or painful, part of it is just a potential for the feeling coming from your past karma; the rest is the way you actualize that potential with your present intentions, your present karma. You fabricate the potential into an actual feeling of pleasure or pain.

In other words, we're not totally passive in our experience of pleasure and pain. Life is not a TV show, where you passively watch whatever's going to happen, and the show will go on whether you watch it or not. It's more like an interactive video game. Only when you participate can the game progress. Some things you can't change in the game, such as the ground rules, but some things you can.

So as a meditator you want to focus on what you *can* change. You want to take advantage of your ability to fashion your experience in a positive way. In fact, a lot of the path of the practice is learning how to shoot yourself not with arrows but with pleasure, to shoot yourself with wisdom. One of the ways we fabricate our experience is with the way we breathe, so you can shoot yourself with pleasant breathing. You can change your experience of the body by consciously breathing in ways that feel good and gratifying. The other way we fabricate our experience is through the way we think, so you can shoot yourself with skillful thoughts. Learn to think about the breath in a way that makes it easier to breath. For example, you can try holding in mind the perception that

your body is like a big sponge, and the breath is coming in and out every pore of the skin. Think of the breath as an energy field that fills the body, and see what that does to the way you actually breathe. This way you begin to see how your perceptions shape the feelings you feel.

One of the lessons you learn as you watch your breathing is that when a pain comes up in the body, you don't have to just sit there and put up with it. You can try breathing around it, breathing through it, changing the rhythm of your breathing in different parts of the body. This will have an impact on how you experience the pain. Sometimes there will be little germs or seeds of an actual physical cause for the pain, but if you change your attitude toward the pain, it's like shooting it with pleasure, shooting it with mindfulness, shooting it with good breath sensations, so that the germs don't spread, the seeds don't grow.

Sometimes by changing the way you breathe, changing the way you think about what your body is doing as it breathes, you can actually change the physical cause of the pain. At other times the physical cause is still there, but as you surround the pain with comfortable breath sensations, the pain won't spread, won't grab hold of your body or of your awareness. You're on top of the process of fabrication. Instead of shooting yourself with more arrows, you're shooting yourself with good breath sensations, with new perceptions of how the breath moves in the body.

This principle applies to issues outside as well, such as your relations with other people. How many arrows do they shoot you with, and how many times do you shoot yourself with your whole quiver of arrows? They may say one thing that gets you upset. They say it once, but then you say it over and over and over in your mind. If you could fire arrows in rapid succession with the speed with which you can think these harmful thoughts, you'd be a great archer.

So you've got to learn how to replace that tendency to shoot yourself with more pain, more arrows, and to shoot yourself instead with some wise perceptions. Get some perspective on that other person; get perspective on what happened. Instead of focusing on all the sorrows and pains and difficulties in your life, you might look at where things are going well right now. This is not to say that you don't have to deal with the negative issues, but you do need to learn how to put things into perspective so that you're not shooting arrows. You're shooting wisdom. You're shooting discernment.

The purpose of all this is not simply to make life livable but also to put yourself in a position where you can really practice. You're not focusing all your energy on adding to your pains. You're getting the mind in a position of inner strength where it doesn't feel the need to go out and straighten out the world before it's going to practice. If you had to straighten out the world before you could practice, nobody could practice on the human plane.

You need to get some perspective on this issue. There are crazy people out there; there are insane people out there. A lot of them have power. But you don't have to allow that power to extend into your mind. You can learn how to keep your attitude as much under control to the best of your ability.

Again, it's like an interactive game. There are some things you can't change in your situation, but there are a lot that you can. Sometimes you make one choice in the interactive game and it changes the whole plot. Other times it can simply dispose of one or two of the bad guys. But at least you can play an active role. You can get the mind into a position where it's able to practice, able to turn around and look inside and see that the real cause that makes your pains burdensome is what you're doing right now.

This again connects with the Buddha's insight that feelings of pain and pleasure are not necessarily a given. We're not simply passive recipients of these things. We take an active role in forming them. And the best way to understand that active role is not to try to be passive and say, "I'm not going to do anything at all. I'm just going to accept what happens." Because what really happens is the active role you're playing then goes underground where you don't see it.

Bring it up into your conscious awareness: that you have at least some ability to fashion that pain, to fashion that pleasure. What direction are you going to fashion it into? Are you going to shoot it with more arrows or with wisdom? You've got the choice.

As you develop skill in this process of fabricating your experience, you gain more insight into the role that fabrication plays in your life as a whole. You're in a better position to decide how to fabricate things: which areas are worth getting involved in, which ones are not. Learn how to fabricate good states in the mind—the pleasure, the rapture of right concentration—for those are good fabrications. The directed thought and evaluation that bring those feelings about: Those are good fabrications because they bring you to a point where ultimately you see that there is something unfabricated, that doesn't arise, doesn't pass away; it's just there. As the texts say, you can touch it with your body, *see* it with your body—i.e., sense it with your entire awareness. That's when you can stop all your shooting because the awareness of what you've totally touched is so totally overwhelming. It's such a total form of happiness that doesn't require you to do anything with it at all.

Some people think that the deathless is just a nice spacey feeling around your sensations, that you tend to miss it if you don't look for it, but it's there: a neither-pleasure-nor-pain kind of space around things. But that's not the deathless; it's just another kind of feeling: the neither-pleasure-nor-pain of equanimity, of the dimension of space. Dressing it up as the deathless is not a skillful way of dressing it up. It may make you feel good for a while, but it gets in

the way of your seeing through the process of fabrication. After all, that sense of space that you create around things is something you've fabricated. You were the one who turned your attention there and highlighted it in your awareness. You were the one who tried to make something out of it, tried to shoot it with fancy labels. The fancy labels may seem reassuring, but they're not the skillful shooting that the Buddha has in mind.

He wants you to shoot yourself with the pleasure and bliss of concentration, with the directed thought and evaluation; to shoot yourself with discernment so that you can really understand how even a state of equanimity is fashioned. He wants you to see what you're shooting yourself with as you hang out in a state of equanimity, so that you ultimately can see through to what's not fashioned at all: "not-made-of-that-ness," as the Pali word for "non-fashioning," *atammayata*, literally means. You're not making anything out of it. You can get there, not by simply telling yourself not to fashion anything, but by mastering the process of fashioning: learning how to shoot yourself skillfully, shoot your pain, shoot your pleasures, shoot your feelings of equanimity with insight—until you get so skillful and thorough in your shooting that there's nothing left to shoot. You can stop. The bows and arrows fall from your hands.

But even before you reach that point, take advantage of the fact that your pains and pleasures are partly the result of past karma, partly a result of what you're doing right now. So look at what you're doing right now. Get really sensitive to that. You'll find that even though you're living in the same place as you were before, it's like being in a different game, a different world entirely. The external situation may be the same as it was, but your experience of it is very different. Even though other people can shoot at you, you learn how not to get hit. Even though there are pains in the body, you don't let them hit your mind.

So learn to use these factors and perceptions—i.e., the ways you label things, the narratives you build up around them, the things you focus on as important, the things that you put aside as unimportant. You've got a lot of choices here, so make sure that you make them well.

Wilderness Wealth

April 20, 2007

Ajaan Fuang used to tell the story of a time when he was on *tudong* with Ajaan Lee. They went out with a fairly large group. Ajaan Fuang, from his years with Ajaan Lee, had learned a very important lesson: Ajaan Lee never really seemed to be concerned about whether anyone was going to be able to keep up with him. He walked very fast in the forest. So Ajaan Fuang did his best to keep up with him. It turned out that on that trip someone else was carrying Ajaan Lee's bowl, another person was carrying his shoulder bag, another was carrying his umbrella tent. So when evening came, Ajaan Fuang and Ajaan Lee found themselves on top of a mountain with nobody else around. They had left the crowd way behind. So Ajaan Fuang strung up his umbrella tent and they had to share the one tent that night. Ajaan Fuang gave his teacher a brief massage and then sat in meditation for a while. He thought of the passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the monk who is content just with his robes, his bowl, his basic requisites; and who—like a bird who wherever he goes—carries his wings as his only burden.

This contentment is a kind of wealth, a wealth that doesn't weigh you down. The wealth that comes from material things is heavy, both literally and emotionally. You've got all these ties and all these responsibilities. But if you can find happiness in just a few things, that kind of wealth is light. This is one of the reasons we go into the wilderness, to remind ourselves that we don't really need all that much—just some basic shelter, just enough food to keep going. If you can train the mind to be happy in a situation like that, that's genuine wealth. There's a real lightness that comes from being able to find happiness simply sitting here breathing. It means that your happiness is dependent on very few contingencies. The people with money, the people with investments, are the ones who have to read the newspapers every day to figure out what's safe, what's not safe out there in the world. But if your investment is in the skills of the mind, then no matter what the situation, you're secure.

There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about the sense of lightness—he calls it the emptiness—that comes from going out in wilderness and just having the perception of wilderness, dropping all your everyday concerns, the concerns of your family and society at large. Just realizing that you're in the wilderness, you're in the wild: There are no clocks, no timetables. And he recommends that you indulge in that perception of wilderness, that mental label that says “the

wild,” because that makes the concerns of human society seem very small, very far away.

Then, while you stick with that perception, not allowing your mind to stray back to issues with this person and that, you can see that a lot of the disturbances of social life fade away. The only disturbances remaining are those based on that perception of wilderness. In other words, there can be a great sense of ease, openness, lightness that comes from being out in the wild, but it’s not entirely carefree. You still have to worry about your physical safety, about what you’re going to get to eat, about what might want to eat you, all the issues that come from identifying with this body, the survival of the body, in a very dangerous place. The mind in that situation is still not entirely free, still not entirely empty of disturbance.

So the Buddha goes on to recommend a more refined perception. In this case it’s the element of earth. He says to think of “earth” without paying attention to its hollows and irregularities—just its earthness, like a hide that’s stretched free of its wrinkles with a hundred pegs. Don’t think of any particulars of earth, but just remember that everything around you, everything within the body, is all earth. And as far as you can think out in any direction, it’s earth. Actually you can do the same with any of the other elements or properties as well: wind, fire, and water. Wind is the energy that permeates everything. Fire is the warmth; water, the coolness and cohesion. These perceptions apply inside your body and out. When you’re not thinking of yourself as a being in wilderness, but just thinking of the body and what it has in common with everything around it, it blurs the distinctions.

First you blur the distinctions inside the body. So often we think of ourselves as a little spirit that inhabits the head, and the body is just a lump. But you want to create a sense of unity there as well. Remember that your head is earth, you’ve got bone all around it: the muscles and skull. You’ve got blood vessels, you’ve got blood in the vessels. All this material stuff here in the head is exactly the same as the material stuff down in the body. Think about that for a while. Try to maintain that perception, that mental label. There’s no real distinction. What’s up is the same as what’s down. This is one of the applications of the bases of power: Up and down are basically the same. You’ve got blood in your head, you’ve got blood in your feet. The blood that’s in your feet right now was in your head a little while ago. The blood that’s in your head right now is in your heart, your intestines. It’s all part of the same thing. Just keep that perception in mind to help erase any sense of distinction.

From there you spread it all around you. There’s earth all around you, wind all around you. Fire, water: All of these properties stretch out in all directions. When you keep that perception in mind, the thought of being in wilderness

seems coarse because that's always concerned with survival: where you're going to eat, what kind of shelter you're going to find. If you were out in the woods right now in the rain tonight, that would be a big issue: how are you going to keep warm? But if you just keep your mind on the perception "earth," then the question of your survival, the question of your comfort fades into the background. You can actually use the perception of fire to warm yourself up, or at least warm the mind up. You can think of the fire element permeating the whole body, not only around the skin, but down into the organs. The potential for warmth exists in everything. Sometimes using that label can accentuate that particular property, so the mind is less concerned about the chill of the rain outside.

What this shows you is the power of your perceptions. The way you perceive things can create disturbance in the mind or can drop the disturbance. That's an important lesson right there. Even just these thoughts of wilderness, thoughts of elements, are the beginning of the Buddha's teachings on how to induce a lack of disturbance in the mind. You go to more and more refined perceptions: from the physical properties, you go to infinite space; from space to infinite consciousness, consciousness permeating everything; from there to nothingness; and then on to neither perception nor non-perception. And then to what the Buddha calls the themeless concentration of awareness.

At that point you've gone even beyond the notion of oneness. Oneness actually takes you only as far as the infinitude of consciousness. To get beyond that to nothingness you have to drop the thought of the oneness: in other words, the sense of one consciousness permeating everything. You go beyond the oneness, then you go beyond even any theme, any *nimitta* for the meditation at all. The Buddha's definition of *nimitta* doesn't have to do with seeing lights or hearing sounds. For him the *nimitta* of right concentration is the four establishings of mindfulness, the four *satipatthana*: body, feelings, mind states, mental qualities, in and of themselves. Yet there's even a state of concentration that doesn't focus on those themes at all. It's totally independent: No object whatsoever, but awareness is concentrated.

But even that, he says, is fabricated. When you realize that—that there is even an element of effort that goes into that, that it's inconstant, stressful, not-self—you can let go of that as well. That's when there's a true awakening. Even though emptiness has its gradations, awakening doesn't happen until you've totally let go of fabrication of all kinds.

The ability to do this starts with the ability to notice the power of your perceptions, what the mind is doing. In other words, you get into a state of concentration and at first you indulge in it, you enjoy it, based on the perception you've chosen. Then you step back a bit and look at it to see what disturbance is

still there. You can get started on that process by going out in the wilderness and seeing the different effects of your perceptions when you're in the wilderness, and then when you're back in the monastery. For lay people, when you're here in the relative wilderness of Metta as opposed to your homes, that reflection gets you started in the right direction. You see that the problem of suffering is not anything "out there." It's largely in the way you perceive things, the way you fabricate things. And the process of meditation is a progressively refined understanding of that teaching—an understanding that goes deeper and deeper, gets more and more subtle, but it follows the same basic principle all down the line.

So learn to appreciate the power of these perceptions: wilderness as opposed to society, the elements as opposed to wilderness. Once you've hit the higher levels of emptiness, you look back on these early ones and see how crude they are. But you also appreciate them because they're useful in getting you to where you want to go. The more you're able to content yourself with little, keeping your possessions few, your responsibilities few, the better the situation you're in to observe these things, to learn from them, to discover wealth that's even greater than contentment, a wealth that's no burden at all.

Disenchantment

April 29, 2007

One of the traditional principles of the teaching is that when the mind gains concentration, it's able to see things as they are. Actually the Pali term means "seeing things as they've come to be." There's an interesting passage where the Buddha makes a distinction between *bhava* and *bhuta*. *Bhava* means a state of being, becoming, the process of becoming, which is a combination of past karma plus our present karma. But then *bhuta* means things as they've come to be: the raw material that comes in from the past before we've added our hype, added our salt-and-pepper and mustard and ketchup to make it what we want.

The trick is in learning how to see things as they've come to be before you dress them up, so that you can move on to the next step, which is disenchantment. Because as long as all you see are the things that you've dressed up and put all your condiments on, you're going to want to eat them. But if you see the raw material before it's been dressed up, before it's been fixed up, you lose your taste for it. It's like that Far Side cartoon. A group of cows is out in the pasture. One of them lifts up her head and spits out the grass and says: "Wait a minute. This is grass! We've been eating grass!" It's the same with us human beings. We've been eating form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, and consciousness. This is a lot of what clinging means. It means feeding and taking our sustenance off these things. But if you look at the raw materials and you think of what kind of happiness you're trying to build out of them, you realize you've set yourself up for a fall. The raw material simply can't provide it.

One of the biggest issues in life of course is lust. If you actually look at what's involved in the sexual act, it's pretty disgusting. And so people spend a lot of time dressing it up. This last week I heard a group of people complaining when they heard about the whole idea of disenchantment and dispassion: Can't we still have sex? In other words, if I get to the point where I don't want it any more, can I still have it? This is the kind of thinking that comes from focusing entirely on how you can dress things up, taking pleasure in the dressing up without really looking at the raw materials that you're dressing up. If you look carefully at just what's there, without all the hype, without all the added condiments, you really lose your taste. And it's very difficult for people to look at what's already there, because there's so much involved in the adding on.

Look at dependent co-arising. It's interesting to note that the Buddha doesn't start everything out with sensory contact, because contact comes at least one third

of the way through all the factors. A lot of other things come even before you've had your first contact at the senses. There are all these attitudes, these intentions, ways of paying attention, and all the different forms of fabrication: These already color the way you're going to approach sensory contact. And these are the factors that make all the difference between whether it's going to cause stress and suffering or whether it's not.

So normally we bring this huge parcel of attitudes to apply to the present moment, to shape the present moment. And one of the main purposes of concentration is to learn how to pare that down, so at the very least you know what you're bringing. You look at fabrication. The bodily fabrication is breath. Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation. Mental fabrication is feeling and perception. These are the basic elements the Buddha has us focus on as we concentrate.

First, of course, we learn how to dress them up in a new way. In other words, bring the directed thought and evaluation to the breath, to create feelings of comfort. You use your perceptions to maintain that sense of comfort. So these elements—the fabrication and intention that we normally bring out of ignorance: We're now shaping them with knowledge, with awareness, so at the very least we can be clear about what we're doing. It's only when we're clear about what we're doing that we can begin to pare away the unskillful things in what we're doing: the intentions that lie to us, the mental verbalizations that lie to us. We begin to see right through them. "Okay, this is a lie. This is not the way things actually are. This isn't how the way things work." We begin dropping those things, dropping those things. We're looking at the nuts and bolts. We're looking at the processes that we bring to the present moment, that we bring to sensory contact. And as we look more directly at the processes, we begin to see how false and artificial they are. This is what helps to bring about *yatha-bhuta-ñāna-dassana*—the knowledge and visions of things as they've come to be.

So you look at the raw materials and you realize you've been eating grass. You thought it was something really special, but it's just grass or even worse. And when you can let yourself look at that consistently enough, that's when knowledge leads to disenchantment. The word *nibbida* sometimes can be translated as disgust: the kind of disgust that comes not because things in and of themselves are disgusting, but simply because we were trying to feed on them. We haven't really been paying careful attention to what we've been feeding on. We begin to see that the things we've been drawing nourishment from really don't have the nourishment we thought they provided.

As Ajaan Lee once said, it's as if most of the flavor comes from our own saliva, like a dog chewing on a bone. The only flavor the bone has to offer is the dog's own saliva. That's what we've been bringing to it. You see that it's a futile

process, and seeing that is what leads to dispassion. The reason why dispassion makes such a difference is because we've been so involved in the activity of dressing things up and making them into something that they're not. When you develop dispassion for that process, you don't want to get involved in that makeup, make-believe dressing up kind of activity. And so your own experience of what's actually going on really changes. You see things from a totally new light, and the whole thing just stops because you're no longer keeping it going. It's not that you've been watching a TV show and you decide you don't like it, and so you turn it off. It's more like realizing you've been in an interactive game and you've been playing it really poorly. The game itself doesn't have that much at all to offer anyhow. So you lose interest in the game. And the game stops.

So the reason we're concentrating the mind here is to get more sensitive to what we're bringing into the present moment, seeing all the hype that we add to the raw material that our past kamma has created for us. We realize no matter how great we are in hyping things, the raw material simply cannot provide what we're looking for. No matter how skillfully we try to make it into something that's lasting and reliable, the materials are ready to fall apart all the time, all the time.

One of the reasons why we don't stop it is that we're afraid that there would be nothing, life would be pabulum, it would be porridge without any condiments. That's what our fear is. This is why we are so loath to let go. But the Buddha's great discovery is that when you stop dressing things up you open up to something that doesn't require any dressing up at all. It's much better to begin with. And all this effort to make things delicious was getting in the way of the happiness you actually wanted. This is when things open up, this is where dispassion leads to release. And it's a release that you can know. It's not like you're blanking out. If that's all it was, if we just blanked out totally, what would you know? Nothing. But the happiness of release is something you can know. You can know this freedom. It comes from taking all these processes apart.

So this is why we meditate. This is why we bring the mind to concentration. Not so that we can just hang out here and have a good time, but so we can see the processes of the mind: how they try to create happiness out of raw materials that simply can't provide it, or at least not in the really lasting reliable way that we want. The Buddha's advice is to use them in a new way, to create a path. After all, what else are you going to work with? How would you create a path unless you took those aggregates that you were using for one purpose and use them for another? Meditation is a different way of dressing up the present moment using form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, consciousness as tools. You dress them in a different way. But in the process of dressing them in a different way, you get to see processing as it's happening. You come to realize that this kind of

happiness that you create by following the path is much greater than what you had before. Ultimately it will take you to a point where you even let the path go. As Ajaan Lee said, that's where it gets really good.

In the Land of Wrong View

June 11, 2007

You probably know the passage in the canon where Ananda comes to see the Buddha and says, “You know, half of this holy life we’re leading, half of this practice is having friendship with admirable people.” And the Buddha says, “Don’t say that, Ananda. The whole of the practice is having friendship with admirable people.” This doesn’t mean that other people can do the practice for you. It simply means that having the right people around you, associating with the right people, enables you to get on the path to begin with and to stay there.

There’s another passage where the Buddha says he doesn’t see any external factor that’s more helpful for awakening than friendship with admirable people. Of course the primary example of the admirable friend is the Buddha himself; he’s the example. Which sets up the challenge: He claims that he was able to find true happiness—a happiness that wasn’t dependent on conditions—through his own efforts, and that we can attain it through our efforts, too. Simply keeping that claim in mind and looking at the example of his teaching, the example of his behavior as it’s recorded, and the examples of people who’ve followed his teachings down through the centuries: Keeping that claim in mind puts your life into perspective.

You can ask yourself: “Do you want to accept that challenge to see if it’s true or do you just want to turn your back on it? Or are you going to be very selective in thinking about it sometimes and hiding it away at others?” It’s a choice you’ve got to make. It’s best to keep it there in the background all the time because it enables you to live your life to its highest capacity. We talk about getting the most out of life; well, finding true happiness is certainly getting the most out of life.

This is where we begin to see the importance of having genuinely admirable people as friends because there are a lot of other theories out there about what it means to get the most out of life and they’re especially strong in our society. We have little boxes in our houses that teach us all kinds of weird things about where happiness lies, what kind of happiness is possible, and what kind of happiness is desirable. You have to ask yourself: “Are those boxes—TVs, radios, computers—your friends or not?” When you hang around with them, what kind of friends are you hanging around with? What kinds of ideas, what kinds of values are you picking up from them? Because it’s not just the flesh and blood people you associate with who create your mental environment. You also associate with the

people who wrote the books you read, who produced all the shows you see, who made the video games you play. The question you always have to ask is: “Why is there somebody out there who wants me to believe this? And exactly what are they asking me to believe? What assumptions am I accepting when I accept their ideas or even start thinking in-line with them?”

Yesterday I was talking with some businessmen who were saying that when you’re in business, you’ve got to be aware of people who are unscrupulous—but even when you’re associating with people who are scrupulous in their business dealings, what assumptions are you picking up from them about the best way to spend your time, the best kind of values to have? You’ve got to question those values. Are they really in-line with your own true interests? Do they clash with the Buddha’s basic teaching that happiness comes from training the mind?

There are a lot of different areas out there in the world where we could be competing with one another. Some people try to compete in being smarter. Some people compete in trying to be wealthier, better looking, stronger, more powerful—in the sense of being able to influence a lot of people. And you’ve always got to ask, “Is that really good for you? When you hang around with a group of people, what are the basic assumptions that underlie your friendship, underlie your interactions?” If you’re serious about your practice, you’ve really got to cordon off an area of your heart through the meditation so that when you’ve been dealing with people, you come back home and sit quietly and say: “Okay, what did I pick up? What germs of ideas did I pick up from these people?”

Even something as innocent as listening to the news: There’s not only the bias of the particular newscaster but also a deeper bias that underlies all the news that you get through the media—which is that the most important things happening in the world right now are things that other people are doing someplace else. And that right there flies in the face of the Dhamma. The Buddha’s teaching is that the most important thing in life is what you’re doing right now. And you want to be skillful about it.

You don’t want your attention to be distracted by other people’s behavior. At most you look at them as examples: Is this person’s behavior a good example? A bad example? But your primary focus has to be on what you’re doing right now. That’s one of the questions the Buddha has the monks ask themselves everyday: “Days and night fly past, fly past. What am I doing right now?” And it’s a good question not only for monks but for all people who are trying to train the mind, trying to find true happiness.

So it’s important that you ask yourself: “Who are your true friends and who are not?” The Buddha gives some examples in the Canon of the people you want to hang around with. One, people who have conviction, i.e. conviction in the power of human action, the power of training the mind, that it really is

important, that your actions are not just throw away, that you can't be apathetic about what you're doing. That's the first prerequisite.

The second one is that you want to find people who are generous—not only because they'll be generous to you, but also because they'll teach you generosity by example so you can pick up some of that habit. If you're going to be competing with one another, learn how to compete in being generous rather than in accumulating.

The third prerequisite is that you want your friends to be people of virtue, people who have strong principles about certain types of behavior that they won't engage in because they know that those things are harmful. Again, you benefit not only because they're not going to harm you, but also because they'll teach you how to be harmless. And they'll remind you that this is important.

And finally, you want friends who are wise and discerning in terms of seeing what really does cause suffering and what doesn't, what leads to true happiness and what doesn't.

So those are the four qualities: conviction, generosity, virtue, and discernment. These are the people you want in your inner circle of friends, the ones you go to for advice, the ones whose values you really feel at home with.

Of course there's the question of how many of those people can you find. If you have trouble finding them outside, you've got to develop this set of friends inside. This is one of the reasons that Ajaan Lee, for example, talks about having the breath as your friend—because being able to stay in touch with your breath helps you watch the motions of your mind. It helps to alert you to when you've picked up germs from other people.

And in terms of your reading and the things you listen to: Read Dhamma books, listen to Dhamma talks. Be selective in your reading of the Dhamma because there are all kinds of dhamma out there, true and false. The Buddha gives some examples to help you sort out which is which. True Dhamma teaches you to be unburdensome. It teaches you to develop dispassion rather than passion, thinking and acting in ways that will loosen your fetters rather than tie them tight, acting in ways that don't lead to entanglement, don't lead to self-aggrandizement. This last is a big problem in America.

These are some basic principles to watch for in your behavior, to watch for when you're trying to decide what's Dhamma and what's not. Just because a book says it's a Dhamma book doesn't mean that it *is* a Dhamma book. And conversely, there are a lot of books out there that may not be "Dhamma books" in an overt way but they do teach good lessons. So learn to be alert to that.

But ultimately the best test is for you to develop as much integrity and as many admirable qualities within yourself as you can, and to be very clear about

what your values are. If you're going to be competing with other people, compete in being virtuous, compete in being generous, in having conviction, in being wise. Ajaan Lee tells a story about when he was a young monk competing with his other young monk friends to see who could sit longer in meditation, who could walk longer in meditation, who could do with less food. It may seem kind of childish but it did develop good qualities. He eventually got over the need to be competitive, to measure himself against other people, but when you live in society it's hard not to measure yourself against other people. So learn to measure yourself in terms of the right standards.

There's another passage where Ananda is talking to a nun and says: "We're practicing this practice to overcome conceit, but conceit has its uses." You see that other people are practicing and you say: "They are human beings. I'm a human being. They can do it. I can do it." So as long as there's going to be conceit in your mind—i.e., the idea that you define yourself in a certain way and you define yourself against other people in a certain way—try to use standards that are wise. Look in terms generosity, virtue, conviction, discernment. At the very least be your own best friend in terms of your values and try to keep those values clear and articulate so that you notice when you're deviating from them. So that even though we're living here in a land of wrong views, you try to create an island of right views around yourself.

Sometimes I feel like we're living on a moon colony here. We have to be very careful to make sure we stay within our support system and carry our own oxygen around with us. Make the Dhamma your oxygen as best as you can in terms of what you listen to, what you read, and how you sort out the germs and other things you pick up from outside. In other words, look for admirable friends and learn to internalize them so you can carry them around with you. That's one of the most important things you can do in the practice.

Right Mindfulness

December 25, 2007

The term mindfulness on its own is something neutral. It can be put to good uses or bad. All it means is simply keeping something in mind. You can keep in mind the fact that you want to put an end to suffering, or you can keep in mind a decision to rob a bank. In either case, it's mindfulness. Mindfulness becomes right depending on the task to which you put it, it becomes wrong depending on the task to which you put it. There is such a thing as wrong mindfulness and keeping the wrong things in mind.

So as we're practicing here we want to make sure that our mindfulness is right mindfulness. There are two spots in the Canon where the Buddha defines it. The best known definition is in terms of the four *satipatthanas*, the four establishings of mindfulness. In fact there are two whole huge discourses on the topic. But it's also good to keep in mind there's another definition of right mindfulness, a lot more simple. It's simply keeping in mind the fact that you want to develop the skillful qualities of the path and to abandon their antitheses. In other words you want to keep in mind the fact that you want to develop right view and abandon wrong view, develop right resolve, abandon wrong resolve, and so through the right and wrong factors of the path. In other words, you're not simply observing without preference whatever comes up. You're keeping in mind the fact that there are skillful qualities you want to develop and unskillful qualities that you want to abandon. You keep that fact in mind and apply it to what you are doing. That's right mindfulness.

It's important to keep this context in mind. Sometimes you see people interpreting the teachings on the establishings of mindfulness out of context. Right mindfulness builds on right effort, the effort to develop skillful things, the desire to develop skillful qualities in the mind and to abandon unskillful ones. You just keep that in mind. Now, to keep that in mind effectively you've got to give yourself a framework that will lead to right concentration. So as we're practicing mindfulness, remember that that's the context. You try to develop a skillful understanding of what's skillful in the mind and what's not, along with the desire to develop what's skillful, to abandon what's not. That's what we're going to keep in mind.

The best way to remember something is to have a good solid framework, a good solid foundation, a good frame of reference, which is where the establishings of mindfulness come in. Sometimes you see these listed simply as

body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities. But actually the establishing of mindfulness is a process. To begin with, you try to remain focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That's the process we're working on here as we focus on the breath. It's the first of the establishings. To remain focused is called *anupassana*. It means you choose something to watch and then you stick with it. In this case, what you watch is the body in and of itself. In other words, not the body as a part of the world or how it might be measured in the context of the world—whether it's good looking or bad looking, whether it's strong enough to do the jobs you need out in the world or not. Just simply the body in and of itself on its own terms.

In doing this, you're ardent, alert and mindful. *Ardent* is what carries the process of right effort into the practice: You really want to do this skillfully. *Alert* means you're watching what you are doing, paying close attention to what you're doing and the results you're getting. And then of course *mindful*, keeping the body in mind. *Putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world* means that any time you might switch your frame of reference back to the world, you try to remind yourself, No, you don't want anything out of that and you're not going to let issues of the world get you worked up. You're going to stay right here with your original frame of reference, i.e., the body in and of itself, and then try to carry that frame of reference into all of your activities.

In other words instead of jumping around to other frames of reference, stay with this one, stay with the sense of the body as you're sitting here watching the breath, as you get up, as you walk around. Try to keep the body in mind all the time and be alert to how the breath energy feels. As for anything else that may come up—whether it's a thought, a feeling, or an interaction—try to see how it relates to the body. This is how you strengthen your frame of reference and turn it into an object of concentration. When you're talking with someone else, notice how your body is reacting during the talking. When you're working, notice how your body is reacting, how the breath is reacting during the working. Always refer things back to the breath. That way your frame of reference becomes really established and you start gaining insights you wouldn't have seen otherwise. That's because establishing the body here as your frame of reference helps to keep the mind inside instead of flowing out.

Luang Puu Dune once said the mind that flows out to its objects is suffering. So you want to keep it inside. Of course what will happen is that occasionally it *will* flow out, and maybe after a time you'll be able to see it flow out as you're not flowing out along with it. In other words, one mental state is flowing out but the observer is staying right here with the body. When you don't go out with that flowing state, it stops. It goes out a little ways and then just falters and dies away.

That's an important insight, the realization that you can observe states of mind without getting entangled with them. That's the point where you can start using other frames of reference.

Ajaan Lee makes the point that when you stay with the breath you've got all frames of reference right there. There's the feeling associated with the breath, there's the mind state trying to maintain concentration, and then there are the various mental qualities: either the hindrances that are coming in to interfere with your concentration or the factors for awakening that are helping it along. You want to be able to make use of all four. Staying with the body helps you to observe the mind, helps you observe feelings and mental qualities without getting sucked in by them.

This is why the meditation begins with the breath. This is why when the Buddha gave instructions in how you could develop concentration in a way that brings to fruition all four establishments of mindfulness, he said to stay with the breath. As you stay with the breath, you focus on the breath in ways that deal with feelings, that deal with the mind, that deal with mental qualities, but you never really leave the breath. You simply train yourself to observe things in conjunction with the breath. So of all the various places you can establish mindfulness, the breath is the most important, the most crucial, the one you really want to work on the most.

There's a passage in the text where the Buddha says you can focus on the body internally, externally, or both internally and externally. This fits into a pattern that we see many times in the teachings: that when you look at yourself you want to also remind yourself that whatever is true about the inner workings of your mind and body is true about everybody else's body and mind. This helps put things into perspective. When you're having trouble with your hindrances, remind yourself that you're not the only one. Other people have trouble with the hindrances as well. When you have pain in the body, remind yourself everybody else has pain in the body as well.

This follows the pattern of the night of the Buddha's awakening. He first started with knowledge about his own past, his own stories. And if you think you're carrying around a lot of stories, well, think about someone who could remember back many eons, all the stories he could have carried around. But he didn't carry them around. He just watched them. He observed them. His next question was, "Does this truth apply only to me or also to other people? What's the principle that determines how you go from one life to the next?"

So in the second watch of the night he inclined his mind to knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of all beings. He saw that this happens to everybody: People die and are reborn on all different kinds of levels of the cosmos. What's essential to know, though, is that the nature of your actions is what determines

where you get born. Skillful actions done under the influence of right view lead to good rebirths. Unskillful ones done under the influence of wrong view lead to bad rebirths as a general principle. Notice that the Buddha started with himself and then moved to other beings.

Only then did he get to the third insight, which was to focus directly on the present moment in and of itself. It may seem like a detour but it's important to put things into perspective before you start watching the present. Otherwise you're sitting here meditating, facing your problems, and it seems like you're the only one sitting here in pain or the only one sitting here with distraction. It's good to remind yourself that everybody goes through these things. No matter how bad the pain, there have been people who have sat through worse pain and yet come out on the other side. So the idea of keeping in mind not only your body, but also the bodies of others, seems to be designed to put things into perspective as an aid to putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

All of this is designed to put the mind in a position where it's ready to really settle down. The mindfulness and the alertness protect the mind, provide a good foundation. The quality of ardency is what helps make it skillful. And when you reflect on the universality of suffering, it gives you the right motivation for practicing. All these qualities together get you ready to settle down and stay really solidly with the breath.

That's what right mindfulness is all about. It's not simply about observing what arises and what passes away and just letting it arise and letting it pass away. It's not so much about allowing, as about directing the mind in a skillful direction toward right concentration. When you're observing things arising and passing away, whether in the body or the mind, it's not just a matter of being a passive observer. You want to observe them so you can understand them, and you want to understand them so that you can learn to have some mastery over them—so that you can direct the states of mind, you can direct issues that arise in the body in the direction of right concentration. If there are pains in the body, what can you do? How can you relate to the pains in such a way that they don't knock your concentration off course? How do you breathe in a way that helps spread some pleasure around in the body? What attitudes do you develop toward what's going on in the body and the mind to help get you over any difficult patches? That's what you want to keep in mind.

So right mindfulness is not only a matter of having the right place to focus your attention; it's also a matter of bringing the right attitude, remembering the right attitude: the attitude that motivates right effort, the desire to do things skillfully and let go of unskillful habits. When you have that attitude in charge, your mindfulness does become right mindfulness, the kind of mindfulness that

helps bring all the factors of the path together.

The Best of a Bad Situation

December 26, 2007

If you ever go to Thailand and spend some time in the Buddhist world over there, you'll be struck by the emphasis placed on the issue of protection. People make merit because they feel the merit will protect them. One of the most popular sayings there is that the Dhamma protects those who practice the Dhamma. People go to monasteries hoping for protective blessings. There's a huge market in protective amulets. What it comes down to is that people there have a very strong sense of how unstable society is, that there are lots of dangers all around. So they look to the Dhamma for protection on one level or another.

And living over there, I came to take that attitude for granted. But on coming back to the States in the early nineties, I found a huge difference. Over here the Dhamma was mainly concerned with how to make the best of a good situation. Society seemed stable, the economy was thriving, everybody was happy. People wanted to meditate so they could learn how to make the most of their pleasures. How to not hold onto them too tight. Learn to accept the fact that these pleasures were impermanent but basically learning how to let go of one pleasure so you could embrace another. That seemed to be the main attitude.

Then there came the airplane attacks and everybody's attitude changed. All of a sudden people were suddenly aware of danger. And it's interesting to see how people who were so complacent reacted with such terror to the fact that their lives might be threatened, their society might be threatened—as if it hadn't been threatened before and if it had suddenly become a possibility. I mean, the immaturity of people's reactions was amazing to see. That's what happens when people who expect nothing but good things to come their way suddenly find something bad comes their way. They haven't learned the skills to deal with bad situations. Some people said that the attacks burst their complacent Buddhist bubbles. Of course that's an oxymoron, a "complacent Buddhist." But that was the kind of Buddhism we had back in those days. It was very complacent. People were used to consuming good things, not learning how to produce good things in their life even in the midst of a bad situation.

This is what the practice of meditation is all about. In fact, all of Dhamma practice consists of how to make the best of a bad situation. We have that chant regularly—we are subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation—and yet we want to be happy. The Buddhist teachings are precisely instructions on how to be happy in the midst of impermanence, in the midst of

inconstancy, stress, things that lay beyond our control. In other words, we gain training not just in being consumers of happiness but in being producers of happiness. This is what the teaching on the power of kamma is all about. So that no matter what the situation you know how to find happiness. It's like being a good cook. A good cook can walk into the kitchen and no matter what food is there in the kitchen can make something really good out of it.

So this should be our attitude as we meditate. As you sit down to meditate you'll find some days that things are going well and other days things are not going well at all. You've got to pull out your toolkit to see what tools you have to deal with that particular problem. Sometimes it's just a problem of a bad mood; some days nothing seems to go right. You want to think of these things as training opportunities because worse situations are going to come along—serious illness, unexpected accidents, death—and they're not pretty at all. Remember in the old days how they would talk about how life is good, death is a part of life, therefore death can be good? Death is no good. You lose control of the body, all kinds of things happen. So you really need to prepare for it.

This is why we practice concentration, why we practice discernment, so that we'll have the tools we need at that point. We also want to practice the right attitude that no matter how bad things get, there's still something we can do about it. If you haven't developed the skills to deal with this particular problem facing you right now, well, use your ingenuity. Try to remember what different Dhamma teachings you've learned and see what might be relevant. The attitude that one meditation technique can cover all situations is a definite mistake. The Buddha himself never taught that. It's just part of our modern assembly line approach to meditation: Just give people one method and all their questions will be answered; all you have to do is whatever you do in the course of the day, just stick with that one method and it will see you through. It's like Henry Ford's old statement—we'll give people whatever color they want as long as it's black. One car for everybody's needs.

As meditators we have different needs. And even as an individual person, you'll find you have different needs as you go through the day, as you meditate, deal with other issues that come up in your life. So it's good to have a full set of tools and then to gain a sense of what tools will work for you right now. When the mind is reluctant to practice, what can you do to get it back in the mood to practice? If it seems scattered, with lots of frenetic energy, how can you put that frenetic energy to good use? If it seems sluggish, how can you wake it up? Instead of looking at these problems as obstacles, look at them as challenges, as opportunities to develop new skills, to learn how to produce a really great meal out of unpromising ingredients.

One of my students in Asia was a chef before he became a monk. He told me

about one time when they had a set meal at this club where he was working and cream of asparagus soup was on the menu. They ended up having a lot more people come than they had anticipated and they were running out of soup. So he went into the kitchen and said, "Don't anybody come in, don't see what I'm doing." He went and got all the asparagus scrapings and peels out of the trash, put them in the blender, seasoned it well, and came up with a perfectly acceptable asparagus soup.

So you want to have that same attitude toward your meditation. Sometimes the materials are not promising. You've got the body and it's got pain. Well, remember that someday further on in your life, the pain is going to be a lot worse. It's not going to just be an issue of pain at that point. You'll actually be facing the end of your life. And it may happen that the people around you will be getting all upset as well. You want to learn how to not pick up their mood and how not to go with the story of how you're going to miss this and miss that. You've got to learn how to put those things aside. You have to figure out how to deal with the pain so that it doesn't overcome you, so it doesn't sap your strength.

So often the way we deal with pain is what saps the strength that we really need to use at a time like that. How do you learn not to go with all the stories that are screaming through your mind? Well, it turns out that these are the skills you learn as you meditate: how not to go with a vagrant train of thought no matter how insistent it may be, no matter how relevant it may be to certain issues in your life. When you realize that this is not useful at this very moment, as a good meditator you should learn how to put it aside even when it's screaming in your mind again and again and again. Your attitude has to be, okay, maybe I can't get you out of the mind but at least I'm not going to let you have the whole mind. I'm going to hold onto just the simple fact of awareness. That way you can fend off a lot of the power of those thoughts.

And the same with the pain. Sometimes you can use the power of concentration to deal with the pain and sometimes it just wears you out. My teacher had a student who had cancer. She's had cancer for many years now, it's taken different parts of her body. It's amazing that she's still alive. And a lot of the fact that she's still alive has to do with the fact that she is meditating. There was one time when she had to undergo radiation treatment and they discovered that she had an allergy to the anesthetic. So the question was what to do. She said, "Well, I'm a meditator, so let me try just dealing with the pain raw." So they tried it. She kept using the power of her concentration to fend off any reaction to the pain. She was able to get through the treatment, but she came out exhausted. Ajaan Fuang visited her the next day in the hospital and she told him what had happened. He said, "If you use just the power of concentration, it's going to wear you out. You've got to use your discernment, to see the pain as something

separate, hold that perception in mind. The awareness is one thing, the pain is something else, your body is still something else.” In other words, the sensations of body are the earth, water, wind, fire sensations. The pain is something else. Learn how to see the distinction.

Exactly what is the pain? You sit here with your awareness of the body from within, which is made up of these four elements, or four properties. Then when the pain comes you tend to glue the pain onto those different properties, as if they become one and the same thing. As an observant meditator you should learn how to undo the glue. The pain sensation is one thing and the body sensations are something else. And you begin to notice that the pain moves around; it arises and passes away. It's a lot less solid when it's separated out like this than it was when it was glued, say, to the earth sensations, your sense of the solidity of the body or the pressure of the blood flowing through that particular part of the body as it runs up against the solid parts, or whatever.

So no matter how bad things get, remember that the skills of meditation are there to make the best of a bad situation: How you can still find happiness in the midst of birth, aging, illness, death, and all the craziness that tends to go on around us. How you can maintain your sanity in an insane world. And having the confidence that no matter how bad it gets, there's always an approach, there's always a tactic, there's always a strategy, there's always a skill.

This is why the Buddha made *dukkha*—pain, suffering, stress—his first noble truth. He pointed directly to the issue that most people like to run away from. He said, “Look, you've got to comprehend this. Only when you comprehend pain can you put an end to it.” So he was willing to face down the pain, face down all the facts of aging, illness, and death. He talks about these things not because he's pessimistic but because he's optimistic. He has a solution.

So try to keep that optimism in your own mind—that there is a solution for every bad mood that comes through the mind, every bad situation there is around you. There is a way to respond skillfully, there's a way to maintain a sense of well-being no matter what. That's going to require that you change the boundaries of what you claim as you and yours. Remember that those boundaries were simply part of an attempt to find happiness. It's not like you're abandoning anything essential. You're just putting your true happiness first, which is why you had those boundaries to begin with. You claim certain things as yourself, certain things as belonging to you because you feel that you have some control over them and they can help you find true happiness. But in many cases you find that you've got to abandon these things because they actually weigh you down. When the Buddha has us let go like this, he doesn't have us let go and just be deprived. He has us let go because he's got better tools.

So have that confidence. And if you find that you haven't developed the skills

that you need to deal with these particular issues, well, when times are good work on them. And even when they're not good, work on them. I don't know how many times people have come to me saying, "There was a period when things were pretty bad in my life and I didn't have any time to meditate." Well, that's precisely the time that you need to meditate. And even if you don't have time to sit with your eyes closed, the breath is still there. All the mental skills that you need in the course of meditation can be developed in any situation. It's just that it's easier to develop them when you are sitting here with your eyes closed. But they are meant to be used no matter how bad the situation gets. That's a sign of how good they are.

Five Strengths

February 20, 2008

Close your eyes, sit up straight, put your hands in your lap. Think thoughts of goodwill—goodwill for yourself, goodwill for all the people around you, for all the living beings everywhere. May we all find true happiness. And then focus on your breath. Know when the breath is coming in, know when it's going out. Stay with the sensation of the breathing as consistently as you can all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. Don't let any distractions pull you away. If you find that you are pulled away, just drop whatever the distraction is and come back to the breath. Each time you come back, notice: Is the breath as comfortable as it could be? Could it be more comfortable? Would slower breathing be better, or faster? Deeper or more shallow? Longer or shorter? You can experiment to see what kind of breathing feels best for the body right now.

You're not just tying the mind down to the present moment. You're exploring the present moment, you're learning about it. Because here it is: this breath. It's been coming in and going out ever since you were born. Have you gotten the most out of it? If it's left unattended, it simply keeps you alive. But if you pay attention to it, you'll find that it's a lot more helpful than you might have imagined. If you breathe in a comfortable way, it helps to erase stress diseases and it's calming to the mind.

More importantly, staying with the breath develops a lot of good and very useful qualities in the mind. And this is important because it's the nature of your mind, that the skills of the mind determine the shape of your life. Essentially we meditate for two reasons: one is to live a better life, and the other is to die a better death. The two go together. We're not just engaging in a little stress reduction here. We're training the mind to deal with the issues of life and death in a much more skillful way.

The strength of your mind lies its conviction in the importance of its own actions, its ability to stick with what it knows is skillful; its qualities of mindfulness, concentration and discernment. These are the qualities of mind that determine how you're going to deal with issues in life as they come up. The more mindful you are, the stronger your concentration, the more likely you are to deal in a skillful way because you're coming from a position of strength. You not only know what the skillful action is, but you're also strong enough to actually do it.

Often we know the right thing to do but we just simply don't have the

strength to do it. And if that's the way we live, imagine what it's going to be like when we die. The body will be a lot weaker, the mind will be distracted by all kinds of things—your thoughts of this, you're going to miss this and miss that, you've only a little time left for this or that. The people around you are all in a turmoil. The mind has to be really strong to put up with a situation like that and not buckle under. And the shape of your mind at that point is going to have a huge impact on how you are reborn. The life you've lived is going to have a huge impact as well.

They compare dying to falling asleep and dreaming, except that in this particular case you can't come back to the body anymore. When you fall asleep, a little dream world will appear in your mind and you go into it: That's your first dream. Now the nature of that dream world could be something realistic or something totally fantastic, pleasant or unpleasant. The nature of the dream world that appears has to do both with your past actions—issues that have been weighing on your mind for a long time—or your current state of mind. The principle that applies as you go to sleep applies at the moment of death as well, except at that point the mind does tend to be a lot weaker, a lot more desperate. It will jump—especially if it's untrained—it'll jump at anything. If you can train the mind to be more mindful and alert to what's going on, then if you see something unpromising coming up, you don't have to jump for it. You realize that you've got the choice, and if you learn how to keep in mind the good things you've done in life, that makes it easier for good dream worlds to appear at the time. But regardless, the important thing is that how you die is determined by how you live. That's the issue right now. And so you need the meditation to develop these five strengths.

The first one, as I said, is conviction: conviction in the principle that what you do is really important, the choices that you make have a big impact on your life. You're free to make those choices. We're not automatons, we're not wired by fate. We always have the opportunity to choose to do the skillful thing in any given situation, and those choices, whether skillful or unskillful, really do shape our lives. If you're convinced of this, you're going to pay a lot more attention to what you do and say and think. It encourages you to be more careful about your choices and at the same time to value your good choices when they come.

So that conviction makes it a lot easier for you to do the right thing, say the right thing, think the right thing. That's a form of strength.

The second form is persistence, as when you're sticking with the breath here. Each time you slip off, you just come right back. Don't let yourself get discouraged, don't get frustrated. Just keep coming back again and again and again. That quality of coming back again and again is going to strengthen all the good qualities of your mind. So when things get difficult, you can still keep on

course regardless of distractions, regardless of what other people may say. If you know that something is really right, really skillful, then you stick with it.

The third strength we're developing here is mindfulness: the ability to keep something in mind. It's often paired with alertness, the sharpness of your ability to see what you're doing and the results of what you're doing. These qualities are important because it's so easy for us to forget. We make up our minds to do something good, then two minutes later we're off doing precisely what we told ourselves we wouldn't do. That kind of state of forgetfulness just keeps destroying itself, destroying you. But if you can keep remembering that "This is the right thing to do, this is where I want to be right now"—for example, when you decide to stay with the breath—you just keep that in mind, again and again and again. Don't let yourself get dissuaded by anything else. This quality of mindfulness and alertness again will see you through a lot of difficult situations and enable you to remember the importance of your actions and the importance of doing what's skillful. It's enable you to remember the skills you've learned from your past experiences.

The fourth strength we're developing here is concentration: the ability to stay with one thing consistently, with a sense of ease, with a sense of well-being—learning how to settle down with the breath in a way that really does feel gratifying to the mind, feels easeful to the body. Have a sense of being at home. The state of concentration is what gives you the good solid foundation you need for making all those right choices that need to be made.

And finally there's discernment when you begin to detect here on a very basic level what kind of breathing is good for the body, what kind of breathing is good for the mind. Who told you that? Well, you learn from your own powers of observation. You learn the most efficient way of getting the mind to settle down. All of this comes from discernment. This efficiency—the ability to cut right through confusing issues to get to the heart of the issue—is going to see you through a lot of things. Because there will be times, say when you're sick, when you're weak physically, when it'll be difficult to get your powers of concentration as strong as they might be when you're healthy. But if your discernment is sharp, it helps you use whatever strength you do have a lot more efficiently and it's a lot more to the point.

You see right to the issue. And what is the big issue? The fact that the mind is causing itself suffering, keeps creating these new worlds, and each world has its seeds of suffering within it. So you want to comprehend that. How does that happen? Why does that happen? When you trace it down, you see that there's clinging, craving, and ignorance. These are the things that cause us to do things that give us precisely the opposite results of what we want. We want happiness, but we cause suffering. It's because we are ignorant. We crave things that are

unskillful, that are not good for us. We cling to things that are not good for us.

When you can see that, then you have to develop the qualities of mind that enable you to let go of that craving and clinging, that can replace that ignorance with knowledge. This is why we have the path. You develop qualities of virtue, concentration, and discernment to give yourself something better to hold onto. As long as the mind is going to hold on, hold onto something good, something that will eventually develop its strengths to the point where it doesn't need to hold on to anything anymore.

When you see that these are the big issues in life, and that this is how to deal with them, that cuts through a lot of the confusion that people bring to their lives, that they bring to every aspect of their being.

So as we meditate we're trying to develop these five strengths—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—because these are the qualities that will enable us to choose what to do and to say and to think so that we will live a better life and, when the time comes, we will die a better death. A life and a death that cut through all the confusing issues that distract us and go right to the point, the point of learning how not to create suffering anymore.

In this way, this path starts from some very basic exercises, some very basic teachings and trainings, but it goes on to accomplish a lot. And as with any large project, it's important that you get the basics right. Once you've got the basics right, then everything else will follow.

The Humble Way to Awakening

March 3, 2008

When you compare the Buddha's teachings to the other teachings being taught in his time, one thing immediately stands out: how humble the main topic of his teachings were. Other teachers were talking about the universe as a whole, whether it was eternal, not eternal, finite, infinite. Or about the nature of the human personality: Is the body the same as your life force, or is the body something separate? How would you describe an awakened person? What are the basic building blocks of the universe? Those kinds of issues. Big issues, Abstract issues.

The Buddha, on the other hand, taught something very immediate, concrete, and quite humble: the problem of suffering, the problem of pain. Something that we don't like to look at, something that we tend to run away from. Something that we wish would just get out of the way so we could deal with the larger issues of life. But the Buddha had the insight to see that dealing with this very immediate, very humble issue really does open you up to the larger issues of life. Even though the main topic of his teachings was suffering, it wasn't limited just to that. What he saw was that if you focused on this one issue, all the other issues get cleared up. Either you find that they get answered or you realize that they weren't worth answering to begin with.

It's important that we realize this as we practice. Some people say that our suffering is such a small selfish issue to be dealing with. Why can't we be dealing with larger issues like compassion, the world as a whole, the interconnectedness of everybody? Why? Because those issues tend to be vague and abstract. They really don't get to the main issue in life: why it is that the mind creates suffering for itself. That's the big issue. If, through our compassion, we could save other beings, then that would be a useful topic to focus on. But the problem is that each of us suffers because of our own lack of skill in dealing with pain. If we'd be willing to learn from the pain, then each of us could take care of our problems and there wouldn't be issues in life at all.

So as you meditate, keep reminding yourself that you're preparing yourself to deal intelligently and insightfully with issues of pain, suffering, disease in body and mind. Particularly in the mind. Pain in the body, as it turns out, is not the issue. We make it an issue that spreads into the mind. If pain simply arose in the body without our connecting it to any suffering or disease in the mind, it wouldn't be an issue.

The problem is that the mind has laid claim to the body. After all, it needs the body to help manipulate the world to get what it wants out of it. So it has a sense of ownership, or at least it tries to assert ownership. But then it turns out that the thing it wants to own, the thing it wants to manipulate, has problems. And so it's stuck. It can't really let go but can't really control it. As the Buddha pointed out, your sense of self comes from this sense of control. We can, to at least some extent, control the body. That's why we assume that it's us or ours. But then you run into the fact that your control isn't complete. This is the source of a lot of the conversations and arguments and complaints in the mind. Why is this?

As the Buddha once said, your normal reaction to pain is twofold: one, bewilderment as to why is this happening; and then, two, the search to find somebody who knows a way out of this pain. Because those two tendencies occur together—the bewilderment plus the search—the search tends to go off in the wrong directions, like the story they tell of the man who jumped on his horse and rode it off in all directions. The mind thrashes around, grasping at this, grasping at that. So the Dhamma that explains the cause of suffering and the path to its end is the Buddha's contribution to end our bewilderment so that our search actually leads to the end of suffering. In the course of following his path, you'll also find that other issues get settled as well.

Suffering is like the watering hole in the savannah. If you're going out to shoot a documentary on the animals in the savannah, you don't range over the savannah looking for them, them because for the most part you wouldn't find them. They'd see you coming and they'd hide. But if you station your camera next to the watering hole, everybody's going to have to come to the watering hole at some point during the day. That's when you get to see them. And it's the same with pain and suffering: All the issues in the mind will gather around here, so this is where you get to see them. If you're in the right position—which is what we're trying to create here as we meditate, putting the mind in a position where it has enough sense of security and solidity through its practice of mindfulness and concentration—you can resist your normal reaction to pain or at least drop the normal reaction to pain and react to it in a new way. As the Buddha said, the way beyond suffering is to comprehend it. Comprehending means that you understand it so thoroughly that you can let it go. You develop a sense of dispassion for it. So to comprehend it you have to watch it again and again and again. The more you watch it, the more you learn.

This ability to learn is an important part of the meditation. When you meditate, you're not simply putting the mind through the meat grinder: i.e. imposing a particular technique on it that's supposed to do all the work for you. The technique puts the mind in a position where it can observe itself, where it can observe its tendencies and learn from what it watches. This involves feedback

loops. In other words, you deal with the pain in a certain way and then you watch and see what happens. Then you do it again and see what happens again. If you've watched enough to realize that this particular approach doesn't work, then you stop to consider what other approach might work. This is how you learn about things. You don't just sit there and look at them. You poke them.

It's like coming across a little animal in the forest and it's all curled up. So you poke it a little bit to see whether it's alive. If you really want to learn about it, you take it into the laboratory. When I was taking biology in college, our first experiment was to take some little rabbits and put them in a glass box, and then change the temperature in the box to see how the rabbits' respiration responded. Afterwards I really felt sorry for the rabbits—they hadn't volunteered for the experiment—but at least we didn't torment them, and we did learn something. When we lowered the temperature, they breathed more slowly. When we raised the temperature, they breathed more quickly. In other words you change the conditions and see how things respond.

It's this ability, one, to act and two, to observe: That's how we learn about things. If you simply acted without observing, you'd be like a machine. If you simply observed without acting, you wouldn't know anything for sure. Things would come and things would go and you wouldn't know what the connections were.

So you learn how to sit here and watch and do things with the pain. And sometimes the doing means simply treating it with equanimity, trying not to identify with it. Simply watching it as an event that comes and goes. That is a kind of action. You decide to take that approach and then watch what happens as a result. You may notice that there are changes in the pain. Sometimes it flares up and sometimes it dies down. Sometimes the mind is perfectly fine; other times the mind is aggravated, irritated by the pain. Well, what happened? When the aggravation comes, what comes along with the aggravation? When the aggravation goes, what goes along with that? Pose the question. Even the posing of a question is a kind of action. It's a part of your experiment with the pain.

This is why the Buddha has us divide things into the aggregates, because the comings and goings of perceptions, the comings and goings of thought fabrications are going to have an impact on the pain. You see that the perception, the label you place on the pain, acts like a bridge. Certain perceptions come and they make the anguish flare up. When you can catch that happening, you realize that the perception doesn't have to be there. Anything that arises can pass away.

So in this way you poke the pain. You change the environment around the pain to learn about how it acts. This is the way you learn about it, through the combination of the doing and the watching. That's the feedback loop. The watching helps you change the doing, and the changes in the doing helps you

understand what's connected with what.

You come to see how a lot of the narratives of your life, a lot of your world views, come flaring up. I once had a very sad conversation with a man who'd been a martial arts expert and had been able to do amazing things with his body. Yet as he got older he developed really bad arthritis and he was convinced that God was doing this to him. Of course the idea that God, the creator of the universe, was dumping on him, was a horrible story, a horrible world view to carry around. Yet he wouldn't let it go. So of course he was going to suffer.

If you have that kind of world view, it makes it difficult to look at the pain with curiosity, with the simple desire to comprehend it, because you're also carrying around the idea that the basic principal underlying the universe is dumping on you in an unfair way. But if you simply have the attitude that whatever comes up and causes pain and suffering, you're going to let that go, you quickly see which narratives and world views aggravate the pain and which ones are helpful. That's how this humble topic of pain can start addressing a lot of the bigger issues that you carry around.

So as you deal with both physical and mental pain in your practice, realize that it's not something you just want to push out of the way or get past so you can get on to the real work. Dealing with the mental pain is the real work. And all the other issues in your life are going to come gathering around here as well. You'll be able to see them in action. They're all part of the complex you want to comprehend to the point where you can gain dispassion and let go. Whatever is causing the suffering, you let go of it. At the same time, you develop the qualities that allow you to stay there and watch and probe and learn.

This way you don't get overwhelmed with the desire to push the pain away and get rid of it. You've got yourself in a position where you can watch for long periods of time and not load yourself down with the pain. The other day we were talking about dealing with aggravations that last for hours and hours. Well, one of the tricks for dealing with aggravations that last for hours and hours is not to think about the hours and hours. The pain has been here for two hours; don't think about the past two hours of pain. Think about what there is right now, right now, right now. When you wonder how much longer it's going to last....don't ask. "How much longer will I have to sit here?" Don't ask. Simply asking that creates that story, that world in your mind that's going to weigh things down. If you deal just with the pain in the present moment, it doesn't weigh the present moment down to point where it's going to break.

So if you allow yourself to be humble enough to deal with just what's going on in the present moment, to watch when the pain comes and when it goes and what comes and goes along with it, you find that your willingness to be humble will open things up to something really grand.

Ignorance

March 12, 2008

There's a question the Buddha has us ask ourselves every day. It's this:

"Days and nights fly past, fly past, what am I doing right now?" That's the big issue. Notice the question is not, "Who am I?" That's a question the Buddha says is not worth asking. If you try to answer that question you end up getting lost in what he calls a thicket of views, a jungle of views, a tangle of views, a fetter of views.

So the problem is not that we don't know who we are; we don't know what we're doing. We want happiness—everything we do, say, and think is motivated by the desire for happiness, the desire for well-being—and yet often what we do, say, and think leads to suffering. That's the real problem in life. That's precisely the problem the Buddha proposes to solve.

He wants us to understand why we don't know what we're doing and how we can learn to do things skillfully. The reason we don't know what we're doing is because we're bewildered by suffering. Suffering is complex. It doesn't come from one single cause. It comes from many causes acting together. And the principle behind those causes is complex. It's not the case that if you do something unskillful, lightning will immediately strike out of the sky. Sometimes the suffering you experience comes from actions you did a long time ago and you don't see the connections.

So as he said, our normal everyday reaction to suffering is twofold: On the one hand we're bewildered by it, and on the other we start searching: Who is there out there who knows a way out of this suffering? As children we go immediately to our mothers, our fathers. We find that there are some kinds of suffering they can help us with and others they can't. So we go looking for other people. And because our quest, our search outside is based on bewilderment, it often leads us to the wrong people, to the wrong ideas of what we can do about suffering. So we have to learn how to look very carefully at what we do and what comes about as the result of what we do.

That's why the Buddha said the basic distinction in his teachings is the distinction between what's skillful and what's not. What are you doing that leads to well being and what are you doing that leads to suffering? He said that when he learned how to divide his thoughts into two types, skillful and unskillful, that was the beginning of getting on the right path. In other words, he learned how to

look at his thoughts not so much in terms of their content, but in terms of the causes behind them and the results to which they lead. He looked at his thoughts as events in a causal pattern.

This is why, when we meditate, we learn how to step outside of our thoughts. Focus on the breath to create a foundation from which you can then look at other thoughts as they arise, to see them simply as events, arising and passing away as part of a causal stream, so that you don't get carried away in the stream of what they might mean.

It was from this basic distinction between skillful and unskillful that the Buddha drew out the four Noble Truths: skillful causes, the path; unskillful causes, craving; the results of skillful causes, i.e., the end of suffering; and the results of unskillful causes, i.e., continued suffering. Those are the four categories of the four Truths. And this, the Buddha said, is precisely what we need to know if we're going to put an end to suffering. We have to learn how to look at our actions in these terms.

To begin with, the four Noble Truths are like a framework for looking at the issues of your life. When anything comes up, ask yourself: Is this suffering or is it the cause of suffering? Or am I on the path to the end? Which part of the path to the end?—because, after all, the path is eightfold, and you want to know which folds you've got. Then when you know which category you're dealing with, you have an idea of what to do with it. If it's suffering, you have to learn how to comprehend it. That means watching it carefully to see how it arises, how it passes away, so that you can develop a sense of dispassion for it.

Often the things we like turn out to be forms of suffering, but we've desensitized ourselves to the fact. But if we learn how to look carefully, we begin to see how these things we like are really stressful. You want to learn to see them from that perspective so that you can develop a sense of dispassion toward them. Otherwise you just keep on creating more suffering without realizing what you're doing. But once you realize that there's suffering, you look for what you're doing that's causing the suffering, what else arises in the mind at the same time as that suffering or stress. In particular, you look for where the craving is, what *kind* of craving it is – it can be sensual craving, craving for a state of becoming, or craving to see whatever becoming has come into being be destroyed—because that craving, too, leads to more kinds of becoming. That's one of the paradoxes in the Buddha's teaching.

If you recognize any of these kinds of craving, your duty is to abandon them, to let them go. Now this often goes against our old habits. Just as we often mistake stress for something that we actually like, we tend to see our forms of craving as our friends. We like them, we nourish them, we take them as our companions. But as the Buddha said, these things are like someone who's worked

his way into our confidence, into our trust, and then someday plans to kill us. So you have to be very wary of these things. When you recognize them, let them go. No matter how much you've liked them in the past, you have to realize that if you want to put an end to this suffering you've been creating, you have to learn how change your habits. You let these things go.

As for the path, that's something you want to develop. Mindfulness is something you want to develop, concentration: all the factors of the path. Don't simply watch them come and go. If you see that mindfulness has arisen, you want to maintain it, you want to develop it. If it's lapsed, you do what you can to reestablish it. Keep working at this, bring it into being. This is a form of becoming, but it's the kind of becoming you need in order to get to the end of the path. Because as you learn how to understand the process of becoming through creating skillful states of becoming, you develop the sensitivity that allows you ultimately to let go of any kind of becoming.

And finally when you see the ending of suffering, i.e., dispassion for the craving, you watch that. In other words, you're not only letting go, you're *watching* the letting go, you witness the letting go at the same time to see what happens.

When you learn how to look at your actions and your experience in this way—in terms of this framework and of the duties that come from the framework—that's when you're on the path. You're practicing what's called appropriate attention: looking at the really important issues of what's happening in the present moment and what you need to do in response. It's not the case that you see suffering once and comprehend it and that's all you need to do. Your powers of comprehension grow stronger as you develop the path, and you need them to be stronger to see the subtleties that surround the issue of suffering. All these factors are really interrelated and they're all skills that you develop together.

This is why the path is a gradual one. You need to develop your sensitivity over time—which is why the work put into being skillful not only as you're meditating but also in the course of the day is effort well spent. It's worthwhile work. You're not distracting yourself from the unconditioned as you focus on these things; you are actually sensitizing yourself to the area in your awareness where eventually the unconditioned will be revealed. As the Buddha said, you touch the deathless with the body. In other words, the same place where you're experiencing the body right now is where the deathless will be touched. The body itself is not the deathless, but that area of your awareness is where you will see, where you will touch the unconditioned. And the only way you can see it there is to sensitize yourself to the area through becoming more and more skillful with the way you breathe, the way you think, the way you deal with your feelings and perceptions.

All these processes of fabrication are conditioned by ignorance. This is why paying attention to that simple question of “What am I doing right now?” is not just a means for being heedful, which is one of the reasons the Buddha has you ask that question. It’s also directing you to the spot that you need to work on in order to put an end to suffering: the spot where intention happens, the spot where results of your intentions are experienced. You really want to become sensitive to these processes so that you can take them apart.

So it’s not a question of who you are. It’s a question of what you’re doing. What are the results of what you’re doing? How can you do it more skillfully? How do you apply the different duties of the four Noble Truths so that you get more and more skilled at them? Those are questions worth asking and worth finding an answer for. Once you’ve fully understood those answers, fully mastered all the procedures needed to find those answers, you’ve reached the end of questioning. You know true happiness, which was the reason you’ve been acting all along. That’s when all your ignorance will end. You may still not know the answers to a lot of other questions, but answering these questions takes care of all the really important issues in life.

In Terms of the Four Noble Truths

May 18, 2008

The Buddha once said that there's no one internal quality more useful for awakening than appropriate attention: asking the right questions, looking at things in the right light. And appropriate attention essentially comes down to seeing things in terms of the four noble truths. And the truths here are not issues of just saying, "Well, there is suffering, there is the cause, there is cessation, there is a path." It's expressed in this way: "*This* is suffering." In other words, you look directly at what suffering is or what stress is. You try to identify in your immediate experience what the cause of suffering is. *This* is the cause of suffering, the origination of suffering, what arises together with suffering. *This* is cessation. *This* is the path. In other words, you look for these things in your direct experience. This is the framework of questions you bring to the direct experience—where is the stress? Oh, it's right here. Where is the cause? It's right here too, but you have to look closely to find it.

When you're looking in this way, you try to apply the duties appropriate to each of these experiences. When you experience stress, you try to comprehend it. Comprehending means knowing it so well that you develop dispassion for it. When you can identify the cause of stress, or the origination of stress, the duty is to abandon it. The cessation of stress, which is dispassion for the cause, that's something you want to witness, to see for yourself: *sacchikaatabbam*. And finally the elements in your experience you can identify as path are things you want to develop. You want to nurture them, strengthen them, bring them, as they say, to the culmination of their development.

As the Buddha points out, while you're engaged in this project, issues of self and not self, and ultimately even being and not being, are irrelevant. You try to look at experience purely in these terms, the terms of stress and the other Four Noble Truths. Questions of, "Do I exist? Do I not exist? What will I be? What have I been?" Those all fall to the wayside. You try to develop the factors of the path, in particular, Right View, Right Mindfulness, and Right Effort, to bring the mind to a state of Right Concentration so that you can comprehend stress. One way this works is when the mind is really concentrated and then you leave concentration, it's useful to ask yourself, "Where is the stress coming in? As soon as I leave concentration, what additional stress is there?"

That's one way of developing dispassion for those forms of stress outside of the concentration: attachment to the body, to feelings, perceptions, ideas, even

attachment to sensory consciousness. You want to notice that when you leave concentration, these things get heavier, more burdensome. The stories you build around them, the sense of who you are that you build around them, the sense of the world that you build around them, all of which is called becoming: It becomes a burden. It becomes, to use Ajaan Mahaboowa's phrase, a squeeze on the heart. And you want to see that, you want to appreciate that, detect it every time it happens so you can really comprehend the stress and suffering. In other words, really develop a sense of dispassion for it.

So that's developing the path for the purpose of comprehending suffering. And then as you comprehend it, in the act of comprehending it, you start letting go of the cause. You feel dispassion for the craving that leads you there, and you want to witness that dispassion—for that makes you more and more willing to look at even subtler levels of stress. You've seen the pattern in operation that when you let go of the cause, you really do experience great relief, a sense of more spacious well-being. And ultimately when you've taken care of all your attachments outside of concentration, that's when you turn on the concentration itself.

Ajaan Mun has an interesting teaching. He says there comes a point in the practice where all four noble truths turn back into one. Everything is to be let go. Everything is to be comprehended to a point of dispassion, so you let go even of the path itself. For you see that even in concentration there is an element of stress. There is inconstancy, stress, a fluctuation in it, because it's conditioned. And when you develop dispassion for that, you totally let go. And because your passion for doing it was what kept it going, in the letting go that also brings about cessation.

Everybody wants to know what happens after cessation. Well, there's no after cessation. What's left, what's not left, it's called objectifying non-objectification. Because with cessation, there's another dimension, which is outside of space and time. And outside of space and time, there's no after. There is no left over or not left over. Even the concepts of existence and nonexistence don't apply.

There's a passage where the Buddha is talking to Kaccayana Gotta. Kaccayana Gotta has asked him what really is Right View, and the Buddha gives the subtlest of all of his definitions of Right View. When you are simply watching stress arise, the idea of nonexistence doesn't occur to you. As you watch stress pass away, the idea of existence doesn't occur to you. You put your mind into a position of simply watching stress arising, stress passing away. At that point, the concept of being, like a being, *satta*, doesn't occur. Notions of existence and nonexistence don't occur. And in that state of mind, the idea of whether a self would exist or not exist is totally irrelevant.

It's not one of the issues you're meant to ask when you are dealing in the

subtlest level of Right View. You're simply meant to ask, is this stress? Yes. This is stress arising and passing away. Anything that you see arising and passing away, you learn to see it all as stress. That of course would include the path. And at that point, in Ajaan Mun's phrase, when all the four noble truths become one, everything gets let go. The motivation for wanting to do this is the Buddha's statement that fruition is the ultimate happiness. And as Ajaan Suwat once said, once you attain ultimate happiness, you don't care whether there is existence or nonexistence, or if there is somebody there, or nobody there. Those issues are all irrelevant. Because existence and nonexistence basically have meaning in the context where there's still suffering. We cling to the question of the existence or nonexistence of a self because we hope the answer to the question will lead us away from suffering to true happiness. But when the true happiness has been attained and realized, those concepts are no longer relevant.

There's a passage where the Buddha once said that belief in annihilationism is the highest of all wrong views, because it helps lead toward dispassion. But we don't want to hold on to the highest of wrong views. We want to hold on to right view, which rephrases all the questions in terms of the four noble truths, and has you look simply at, "Right now, where is there stress?" When you can identify it, try to comprehend it. Develop whatever qualities are needed to comprehend it. And as you comprehend it, you develop the kind of knowledge that leads to dispassion. You realize you don't want to continue creating this and feeding it. As you stop the process of feeding it, the suffering disbands. That's all that really matters.

For as the Buddha said, all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering, stress and the end of stress. And it's all an issue of doing. Suffering is something you cause, through the activity of the mind. The path to the end of suffering is also something you do, something that takes you to the end of suffering. So the Buddha's not concerned with the whatness of things. He's more concerned with the howness of things, how you do it: how you cause suffering, how you bring it to an end. It takes some major shift of our mental universe to be concerned more and more with the howness, but it's a shift that really pays off.

Faith in the Buddha's Awakening

May 19, 2008

Focus on your breath. Know when it's coming in, know when it's going out. And allow it to be comfortable going in and going out. Experiment to see what rhythm feels best right now. As you stay with the breath, you're staying in the same place where the Buddha was staying when he gained awakening on the full moon night in May more than 2,600 years ago. We're commemorating that night tonight. In fact we're commemorating three events in the Buddha's life. It was on the full moon night in May that he was born. And 35 years later on the full moon night in May, he gained awakening. And 45 years after that, on the full moon night in May, he passed away into total Nirvana.

It's good to remember these events because they help put our own lives into context. What did the Buddha prove on the night of his awakening? He proved that there is a true happiness that doesn't have to depend on conditions. It's not touched by aging, illness, or death. And he proved that this happiness can be found through human effort. Now the effort required qualities that were not special to the Buddha, qualities that we all share to some extent, simply that he had taken those qualities and developed them to their fullness.

And so what does this mean for our lives? There is that potential for true happiness and it can be found by developing qualities within the mind. This is why the beginning of the path is having faith in the Buddha's awakening. In other words, he can do it, we can do it. So when we pay homage to the Buddha, we are also paying homage to this potential within ourselves. We're showing respect for our desire for true happiness.

It's a good thing to show respect for, because the world tells us that that kind of happiness is impossible: "Don't even think about it. Buy our things. Pretend that they make you happy. Settle for a happiness that's fleeting and compromised." So you can ask yourself, what kind of potential do you want to respect? The potential for fleeting happiness based on material possessions, relationships, travel experiences, whatever? A happiness that comes and goes? We know it's going to go, so to enjoy it, we have to close our eyes to huge areas of life. Or are we going to look for an open-eyed happiness that admits the drawbacks of our worldly pleasures? Where we devote ourselves to the effort that's required to develop those qualities inside the mind? That's our choice.

What are those qualities? Well, they start with mindfulness and alertness,

qualities we're developing right now. As we keep the breath in mind, that's mindfulness. And as we watch the breath, we also watch the mind to make sure it stays with the breath. That's alertness. If we catch it wandering off, then we bring it back with a quality called ardency, which means that as soon as we catch it wandering off, we bring it right back. While the mind is with the breath we try to be as sensitive as possible to the breathing. Think of the breathing as a whole body process. Your entire nervous system, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes, every part of the body is involved to some extent with the breath. And think of the breath not just as the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also as the movement of energy throughout the body. Try to be sensitive to that. As you're sensitive to it, use your powers of evaluation and observation to see what feels best, what kind of breathing feels gratifying throughout the body.

This is a good path to follow because it doesn't save all of its pleasures to the end. There is pleasure in the meditation. There is also the pleasure of knowing that the path doesn't ask anything ignoble of you. All the qualities you develop are good qualities of mind, noble qualities of mind, which is why they say that the Dhamma is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end.

The quality of ardency is especially important. It's what helps the other good qualities of the mind grow. It's part of right effort. Right effort involves three issues. First is simply the amount of effort, the amount of effort that you're up for. There is a famous story of a monk who had been very delicately brought up. His life was so refined that hair was growing on the soles of his feet. He never walked on anything rough. So when he decided to ordain and was doing walking meditation on a sandy path, his feet started bleeding. He began to get discouraged. "Maybe," he said, "maybe I should disrobe. Go back and be a lay person." The Buddha saw what was going through his mind, so he appeared right in front of him. He said, "Are you thinking of disrobing?" The monk—his name was Sona—said Yes." And the Buddha said, "Sona, when you were a lay person, were you skilled at playing the lute?" Yes, he was. "And when you played the lute and the strings were too tight, did it sound good?" No. "When the strings were too loose, did it sound good?" No. "In the same way you have to tune your effort to what you're capable of: not too tight, not too loose, just right for what you can do.

That's the first issue in of right effort: exerting the amount of effort that's right for you right now. You have to gauge what's too much, what's too little. But it's not just any old effort. That's the next issue. The Buddha defines right effort as generating desire: You have to have the right attitude; you have to *want* to do it. In other words, you have to value the path, you have to value the goal. Sometimes when the practice gets dry you have to give yourself a good pep talk, remind yourself of why it's a good thing to do.

To do what? That's the third issue, which is the type of effort. If unskillful qualities based on sensuality, ill will, or cruelty, arise in the mind, you try to abandon them. If they haven't arisen, you do what you can to make sure they don't. In other words, you can anticipate sometimes that these things will arise, so you try to restrain yourself ahead of time. If you know that looking at something is going to give rise to greed, anger, delusion, lust, or fear, you don't look at it. Or you try to look at it in a different way so as to prevent those qualities from arising. As for skillful qualities, if they haven't arisen yet, you try to give rise to them. When they have arisen, you do what you can to develop them as fully as you can.

So there are four types of effort: abandoning unskillful qualities that have arisen, preventing unskillful qualities that haven't yet arisen, giving rise to skillful qualities and then developing them. So all in all, right effort has these three aspects: One, what's the right amount of effort you can handle right now? Two, what's the right attitude to learn how to give rise to desire so that you want—three—to develop good qualities, you want to abandon unskillful ones. Even though there are times when we take lust, anger, and greed to be our friends, we have to realize these are not our friends. They turn on us. They make us do stupid things and then when we reap the results, they run away. If you had friends like that, you wouldn't hang around them very long. But here they arise in the mind, so you identify with them and you fall for them.

This is an important lesson in the path. Just because something arises in the mind doesn't mean that you have to follow it, that you have to believe it. As they say, don't believe everything you think. Try to develop qualities that are your friends, that will lead you to do things that you will be proud to have done. Qualities like mindfulness, alertness. Or the qualities that are traditionally associated with the Buddha: wisdom, compassion, and purity. These qualities may seem far away, but as the Buddha points out, they can be developed simply by taking true happiness seriously. Wisdom begins with the question: What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? That question is wise because you realize that happiness depends on your actions. You can't just sit and hope for it to come floating by, or expect your Buddha nature to suddenly arise and do everything for you. You have to create the causes. And then you realize that long-term happiness is better than short-term. That's how wisdom begins. As the Buddha once said, when you see an abundant happiness that comes from sacrificing a lesser happiness, you should be willing to sacrifice that lesser happiness for the greater one.

It sounds obvious but when you look at the way people live their lives, it's as if they'd never heard of this idea. Everyone goes running for the quick fix. So always try to keep in mind that the long-term happiness is the one that's

worthwhile.

Then you reflect on the fact that if you want your happiness to last, it can't depend on the suffering of other people, because they want happiness too. So you have to keep their happiness, their well-being in mind. At the very least, make sure that your happiness doesn't oppress them. That's the beginning of compassion.

And finally purity is the willingness to look at your actions and see if they actually do lead to true happiness. Before you act, try to anticipate the results. If you anticipate any harm, don't act in that particular way. If you don't anticipate harm, go ahead and do it. While you're doing it, watch to see what actual results come, because sometimes your actions give immediate results. If you see that they're harmful, you stop. If not, go ahead, continue with the action. Finally, once the action is done, reflect on the longer term results. And if you see that they caused harm, go talk it over with someone you respect and resolve not repeat that action. As the Buddha said, this is how you purify your actions—so what you do and say and think actually does lead to true happiness.

So all these qualities of the Buddha—wisdom, compassion, and purity—come from the simple principle of taking your true happiness seriously. You'd think that would be what we would all want to do: to take our true happiness seriously. But again you look around and it's very rare. This is why it's useful to think about the Buddha, his example. This is why having faith in his awakening, that he really did it, and the happiness he found really was true, is such an important motivation in the practice. We can't know that for ourselves until we put his path into practice. This is why it requires a sense of conviction. Some of the results we can see along the way, but the ultimate result comes only after we've learned how to apply this principle of right effort.

So take the Buddha's awakening as your working hypothesis. And as you show respect for the Buddha, remember you're also showing respect for your desire for true happiness. And it's a good kind of respect. When you think of all the other things in the world that you could respect, this is really the most worthwhile.

Fabricating against Defilement

May 20, 2008

Last night I talked about three aspects to right effort: the right amount of effort in terms of what you're capable of at any particular time; the right attitude to the effort, the ability to generate the desire required for whatever the effort is; and the right type of effort, trying to abandon or to prevent unskillful mental qualities, to give rise to or to develop skillful ones.

There is a fourth, though, which is the right amount of effort required by the particular task. As the Buddha points out, there are some unskillful qualities arising in the mind that don't require any effort at all. You simply watch them and they go away. After all, everything that arises from conditions will have to pass away at some point. And some of these things when they go away, really do go away. That's the last you see of that particular problem. But others come back. And it's not enough to say, "Well, it went the first time, it'll go away the second time. That's the way things are." That's not the type of attitude the Buddha took. If they keep coming back it means you have to actually apply serious effort, what he calls "exerting a fabrication." It's a technical term. Fabrication is of three kinds: bodily, verbal, and mental.

Bodily fabrication is the breath. Exerting the breath against an unskillful mental state means checking to see how that mental state has had an effect on the body, and how it gains strength from the effect. For instance, sometimes anger arises in the mind and it gets into the way you breathe, into your heart rate, into the hormones. And because that's such an unpleasant physical feeling, or series of physical feelings, you're overwhelmed with the desire to get it out of your system. You think that by expressing the anger, saying something harsh or clever, whatever, will keep the feeling from staying bottled up in the body. But that doesn't work at all. It just creates new habits: that you have to give in to the anger every time it comes, otherwise it's going to, as they say in Thai, squeeze your nerves. So you give in and act on the anger and become a fool as a result.

The same with lust: If you feel you've got to get it out of your system by acting on it, it simply becomes another unskillful habit. The Buddha, however, offers another alternative: Use the breath to counteract that impulse, that belief. Find where the breath has been changed by that emotion, and consciously breathe in a different way. It doesn't necessarily make the emotion go away, but it does weaken it. It also gives you a place to stand. You can stand in a much more comfortable sense of the body and look at the anger, look at the lust for

what it really is. But your ability to do this also depends on the verbal fabrication and the mental fabrication.

Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation. Your anger may direct your thoughts at what a bad person that is, but you can consciously direct them in another direction, thinking for instance of the person's good points. Then you can evaluate the situation to see which way of thinking is better for you, better for the situation. In other words, you learn how to think in a different way, focus on different issues. And actually talk yourself out of the anger, talk yourself out of the lust.

This depends in turn on the mental fabrication, the feeling and the perception that go along with the original defilement. This means first actually perceiving it as a defilement. This is one of our big problems. As the Buddha said, the main problem with the hindrances, for instance, is you see things in line with them. When sensual desire arises, you think that the object of the desire really is something worth desiring. Ill will arises and that person really is despicable, really should suffer. Sleepiness arises and you think, well, it's a good time to sleep. Restlessness and anxiety arise, and you think that the issues they focus on really are things you have to worry about. Or doubt arises, and you think your doubts are justified. In other words, these things hoodwink you into seeing things in their terms. If something likable arises in the mind, all you can see is its attractive side. If something you don't like arises, all you can see is its unattractive side.

To pull yourself out from under the influence of these things, you have to recognize that they are defilements. Then you have to learn how to perceive the issue in a different way. Look for the stress. Look for the results of going after that attractive thing. And see that it doesn't lead anywhere. Many times it leads to actual negative results. You want to keep that in mind.

That's what we have mindfulness for. Remember, mindfulness isn't just being aware of the present moment. If you were solely aware of the present moment and nothing else, you would have no memory of what had worked and hadn't worked in the past, what was skillful, what wasn't skillful. You'd be totally at sea. Mindfulness actually means keeping things in mind, reminding yourself that when something looks attractive, it's not necessarily good for you, may not lead you to happiness. And remember your experience with those thoughts in the past: Where did they lead? If you give in to lust what happens? You get worn out, the level in the mind just falls and falls and falls. If you give in to anger, you're on fire all the time. Yet somehow we forget this. And the next time the impulse arises, we go with it again. It flashes a little gold our way, and we just run after it. It turns out, of course to be fool's gold, but we forget.

This is one of the reasons why we develop mindfulness—keeping the breath

in mind, keeping the Four Noble Truths in mind. It means just this: remembering what led to suffering in the past is probably going to lead to suffering again, no matter how attractive it may seem right now. Other practices that did lead the mind to clarity in the past will probably do it again. So even though the practices may seem difficult, you learn to inspire a sense of desire in yourself to do them. This is what the right attitude toward to right effort is all about. As the Buddha said, one of the customs of the noble ones is to delight in abandoning, and to delight in developing. This means, of course, to delight in abandoning unskillful mental states, and to delight in developing skillful ones. Which is just the opposite of where most of us go. We delight in the unskillful things, we want to keep developing them. And we don't delight in developing the skillful ones.

Ajaan Suwat once had a comment. He said, "Look right there at the things you like, that's where you're going to find the cause for stress, the cause for suffering." So you've got to learn how to look past the appearances of things, and realize that this really does require work. When the Buddha talks about seeing things as they really are, it doesn't mean simply accepting that the way we are is the way we're going to have to stay forever. We should also see that we have the potential to get rid of unskillful states. As the Buddha said, if it weren't possible to get rid of them, to totally be free of them, he wouldn't teach us to do it. But he did teach that. You can be free of these things.

There's some confusion around the phrase "knowledge and vision of things as they are." Actually the phrase is "knowledge and vision of things as they've come to be." It's a special kind of knowledge in which the results of past karma arise, but you don't create any new states of becoming out of them, and you don't try to destroy them, either. This knowledge comes at the very end of the path after you've gotten rid of greed, anger, and delusion, so that you can see these things as they actually arise. If greed, anger, and delusion are still arising, you can't see things as they've come to be, because you've already jumped in and have gotten involved in creating a state of becoming around them.

So as long as there are defilements in the mind, we have to admit that, yes, these are defilements. It's one of those words that we here in the West don't like. "There's nothing defiled about my mind," most people say. Of course that's the defilement of pride right there. So you have to admit, yes, these things do defile the mind, they make it darker, they make it more obscure, and some of them require real work before we can get rid of them. But once you get the hang of it, it's pleasant work as you're developing mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment. These are good qualities to have in the mind. They do depend on desire but it's good desire. The Buddha didn't say that all desire was bad. After all, the ability to generate the desire to engage in skillful effort is an important

part of right effort. It's a desire to be developed, to be praised, to be encouraged.

So although it is true that some defilements go away simply by watching them, that's only one of many approaches you'll need, only one of many aspects of right view. If you try to make it a blanket approach, you turn it into a wrong view, wrong effort, wrong all down the line. Right view sees that many different approaches are needed in the practice, to deal with the many tricks of the defilements. And right effort is willing to do whatever is needed for that particular case, that particular defilement, or that particular skillful quality in the mind.

You have to broaden your view. Don't hope that simply having a hammer in your toolbox is going to enable you to build a house. You need the hammer and the saw and the chisel and all the other tools, and the Buddha provides us with a full range. An important part of the skill, an important part of right view is learning how to master all the tools and how to read the situation so you can figure out what's needed. In that way when you have a well-rounded understanding of right view and right effort, it helps all the other elements of the path to become right as well.

Feeding your Attack Dogs

May 27, 2008

A couple of years back I read an account by a woman who had been on a meditation retreat. You've probably heard about vipassana romances, and she had a really bad case. She suddenly fixated on a young man who was also on the retreat a very strong sense of desire. She found that she couldn't be in the meditation hall with him, so she went off to meditate in her own room. And that's when she realized, or so she said, that it wasn't just her personal desire she was feeling. It was desire as a cosmic force running through her. And she wasn't responsible for it, so it was all okay.

It's scary to think that this person is now a meditation teacher, teaching people about cosmic desire, or whatever. She'd missed an important point in what the Buddha taught about desire: that when these things come into the mind, it's not cosmic forces acting through you, it's your old karma: these thoughts that spring up over you and suddenly take you off in different directions. You're sitting here meditating, minding your own business, very dutifully working with the breath, and then suddenly you find yourself off someplace else. The fact that there was the initial impulse to go someplace else: That's past karma. The present karma is your decision at some point to go along with it. You're hardly conscious of it, the fact that you did make a decision, is because these things operate so far below the radar level of the ordinary mind.

This is one of the important issues you have to face in your meditation: that a lot of decisions are going on behind the walls you've erected in the mind, and you don't like to think about the decisions you're making. But the fact is, you are, and you've got to bring your radar down so that nothing can go below it. So prepare yourself for the fact that the mind is going to leave the breath. There will be a lot of vagrant intentions that don't fall in line with the initial intention, which was to stay here with the breathing, to try to stay concentrated all through the hour. You've got to watch out for the present karma of when you decide to suddenly slip off to contemplate what you're going to do next week—or what you did last week, or what you'd like to have for a meal tomorrow, or how you're upset about something somebody said or did, or how you're embarrassed about something you did a while back. These things are going to come up. And you've got to be prepared to notice the stirrings in the mind when they're just an incipient form, so you can catch them in time and reaffirm your intention to stay here with the breath, to enjoy the breath.

So you're dealing with a complex issue: a combination of past karma and present karma. While you're here, you want to watch out for the past karma. While you're here, you want to watch out for the present karma. Where does that past karma come from? All too often when we think about past karma, we think about previous lifetimes where you don't know who you were, or what you were doing, or why you're developing the habits you have. But past karma is often karma from today: thoughts you had in the course of the day that you allowed yourself to wander with for a while. Well, that becomes a habit. And then that habit gets carried into the meditation.

So when you're working on the mind, it's not just a matter of what you're doing while you're here sitting with your eyes closed, but also of what you do and think about during the rest of the day. The Buddha talks about *anusaya*, which is sometimes translated as latent tendency, sometimes as obsession: these latent desires, latent drives in the mind that we keep feeding, throw them little scraps in the course of the day so they get used to being fed. It's like a team of attack dogs that we keep penned up in the house. You don't want them to be too well fed, because then they get lazy and fat, and they won't attack intruders when you want them to. But if they stay too hungry, you're afraid they'll attack you. So you're constantly throwing them little scraps; if you don't, they're going to turn on you and eat you up. But actually, of course, they're gnawing on you all the time. And the more you feed them, the more they actually eat you up. If you don't want them to attack during the meditation, you have to learn how not to feed them at all, so that they ultimately die.

There are seven in all: sensual passion, irritation, views, uncertainty, conceit, passion for becoming, and ignorance. These are the things we keep feeding over the course of the day. If you find yourself getting interested in something really attractive, you're throwing a little scrap to sensual passion. Thinking about things that you feel righteously angry about, you are throwing some scraps to irritation and to views. And you do the same with ignorance and conceit: comparing yourself with somebody else to feel that "I'm okay as a person." It's amazing how in the course of the day, how often we compare ourselves to this person and that person, always finding somebody who is at least a little bit worse off than we are, so we can comfort ourselves with the idea that we're okay. Or you can focus on people who are way better than you are, and get yourself down in the dumps. Why the mind does that? What sort of satisfaction it finds there? Maybe it wants to say, "Well, I can't be expected to do such and such, because I'm nowhere near where that other person is." That fulfills a nefarious role in your attitude toward the meditation.

Passion for becoming, the desire to think about this little world of thought, that little world of thought: We keep these thought worlds, these attack dogs,

either for the purposes of using them against other people or for our own entertainment. Because part of us feels if we didn't have these forms of passion, we wouldn't have the impulse or the ability to survive. If we didn't nurture our sense of righteous anger, we wouldn't be able to fend off injustice. One of the lessons the Buddha taught is that you don't need to have these defilements in order to survive. You don't need to have them in order to work for what's right. And they're certainly no help in training the mind.

There are a few you can use a little bit—as when Ananda talks about using conceit to give you confidence in your ability to handle problems in meditation, or when you use your passion for becoming to create good states of concentration, or irritation with your unskillful mental thoughts to get rid of them. So they do have their role, but you've got to watch out for the totally unskillful roles you give to these attack dogs. If you keep feeding them, they're going to expect to be fed all the time. When they find they can't get fed in your meditation, they attack. And part of you pretends that you haven't been doing anything, you don't know where they came from, these are cosmic forces over which you have no control. But you've been feeding them all throughout the day. You've got to watch out for that. Remind yourself: You're not Snow White living with seven cute and helpful little dwarfs; you're a suburban menace raising seven attack dogs over which you have no control.

This is why the Buddha taught restraint of the senses. As you look and listen and think in the course of the day, ask yourself, "Is this really helping in the practice, or am I feeding these attack dogs?" Years back, when Ajaan Suwat was asked about how to bring meditation into the course of your daily life, he focused on the issue of precepts and virtue: *Sila* is the Pali word. Ordinarily when we think about precepts, we think primarily about the five precepts. And that is one level of restraint, which is important for reining in some of these attack dogs. But *sila* has other levels as well. Restraint of the senses is a kind of *sila*, as is purity of livelihood. Reflection on how you use the requisites is a kind of *sila*: Before you use food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, you ask yourself, "Why am I using so much? Is it really necessary for the purpose of the practice?" As the Buddha realized when he was leaving his period of austerities, you do need to feed the body and treat it well enough so it has the strength to give rise to good states of concentration. But you have to be careful not to overindulge, because otherwise the *anusaya*—this obsession—of sensual passion gets fed and gets used to wanting more food.

So these various levels of *sila* are important parts of the meditation. We do the reflection on the requisites after as a group at the end of the day here. But it's important to keep that reflection in mind as you go through the day. That, combined with restraint of the senses and your general observance of the

precepts, is what helps keep these attack dogs in line. It forms the kind of past karma that will be useful past karma when you're sitting here and meditating. If you haven't been feeding the dogs all day, and you've been alert to noticing when you're tempted to feed them, then you'll be more alert to them as you sit here and meditate. And that way they won't suddenly take over your meditation and devour it.

Which means that this is an all-day, all-life practice. Many of us start out thinking, well, it would be good to have some stress reduction, or good to meditate in order to calm the mind down a little bit. But as you calm the mind, you find more and more that the peace coming from meditation is the only true form of happiness. *Natthi santi param sukham*, as the Buddha said: There is no happiness other than peace. The more you appreciate that, the more you realize what a full-time job it is to keep the mind peaceful, especially in modern society where there are so many demands on our time—and the media use so many tricks for feeding our attack dogs, because they want to make money off of our attack dogs, and rarely care who gets bitten in the process. You've got to watch out for that.

At the same time, there's the general modern tendency to want to simplify everything. "Meditation is just stress release," or "Awakening is just getting the mind really still." There is that story of the woman who had a stroke, who describe it as her "awakening," and everybody likes to believe that's all it is, just cut off the left side of your brain, and everything will be okay. But the practice has lots of ins and outs, because past and present karma interact in lots of complex ways, requiring that we give them our full attention if we're really serious about finding true happiness for the mind.

And after all it is your true happiness that you're after here. It's not like you're being sucked into some brainless cult. You're being asked to take your true happiness seriously, which you'd think people would do naturally. But they don't. The culture mitigates against it, and a lot of our own internal dishonesty mitigates against it. So it's going to take a while. It's a complex process to undo these tendencies, to undo these habits, these obsessions that we've developed. It's a full-day, full-lifetime process, but it's worth it. Because you ask yourself, if you're not giving yourself over to true happiness, what are you giving yourself to? You're just becoming food for your attack dogs.

If you don't learn how to stop feeding them, they'll just keep feeding on you again and again and again, all day long, all life long, endless numbers of lifetimes long. You have to ask yourself: Do you want to be subject to this all the time, or would you rather be free? When you're free, you're not the only one who benefits. There's an interesting passage in the Canon where Mahakassapa was talking to Ananda, saying that during his first seven days as a monk, he ate the

alms food of the country as a debtor. But beginning with the eighth day, when he gained full awakening, he was no longer a debtor. That's because as an arahant, he had a totally different relationship to food. When he was eating food, it wasn't his attack dogs eating. He was simply eating out of the knowledge that he was going to stay alive long enough to live out his time, and was feeding to keep the body alive and useful during that period.

A standard phrase in the Theragathas is one the arahants say: "I don't delight in living, don't delight in dying; I live out my time, waiting my time as a worker waiting for his wage." So the arahants eat without obsession and in doing so, as they use the requisites, the people providing the requisites gain a huge amount of merit. In fact, that's supposed to be one of the motivations we have for the practice, is that those who support us will gain a great reward so that our consumption of things is actually a gift. That's an amazing thing. For most of us consumption is just consuming then it's gone, taking, taking, taking. And then to compensate for that, we try to give back something. But with the arahants, just the fact that they are so pure means that as you provide them with the requisites, anyone who is in any way involved in providing the requisites will gain huge rewards.

So their consumption is actually an act of generosity. It's an act of giving. It's a very special way of living, so that instead of attack dogs eating, it's all giving, giving, giving. As that comment Ajaan Suwat made once, when someone told him, "This Buddhism you guys teach would be really good if you had a god to give you a sense of comfort, support, as you go through difficult parts of the practice": Ajaan Suwat's response was that "If there were a god who could decree that by my eating everybody else would become full, I would bow down and worship that god." Well, awakening does that to some extent. The arahants, when they consume, they are giving. And if that's not miraculous, I don't know what is.

Against Your Type

June 22, 2008

There's a passage in *The Craft of the Heart*, which is one of Ajaan Lee's first books, where he talks about six different personality types—in Thai the word is *carit*; in Pali, *carita*. There's the passion type, the aversion type, the delusion type, the intellectual type, the gullible type, and the worrying type. In listing these types, Ajaan Lee is obviously uncomfortable with them. He treats them because they were in the standard Dhamma textbooks that had been disseminated all over Thailand by that time, and which in turn were based on the commentaries. In fact, one of his reasons for writing *The Craft of the Heart* was to take a lot of the teachings from the Dhamma textbooks and treat them from the point of view of the forest tradition.

So because these concepts were in the books, he had to treat them. He talks about them, and about the idea—again from the commentaries—that each has a particular type of meditation suitable for it. But then, at the very end of the discussion, he erases the distinctions. He says that, actually, all of us have all of these tendencies. It's not that people are types. We may have certain tendencies, certain habits that we develop over time, but we each have the full range of defilements. So we all need to have a full repertoire of techniques, a repertoire of skills, for dealing with them.

This principle applies to meditation, and it applies to daily life as well, because we have the tendency to type ourselves. And either we like the type or we don't. If you like the type, you just say, "Well, I'm the person I am and you have to accept it, that's the way it is, that's the way I'm always going to be." As for the people who don't like the type they've assigned themselves, they say, "Well, maybe I'm too assertive all the time, maybe I should be less assertive," or "Maybe I'm not assertive enough and I should learn to be more assertive all the time."

All of this misses an important part of the teaching, which is that instead of looking at things in terms of the sort of person you are, you want to look at each situation and ask, "What's the appropriate action to do right now, in these particular circumstances?" Again, this applies both in the meditation and in your practice outside of the meditation, where you practice in dealing with other people. You don't want to wake up in the morning and say, "I should be more assertive," and then go through the day just being more assertive willy-nilly. You need to read the situation: In which types of situations and with which sorts of people do you need to be more assertive, in which do you need to be *less*

assertive, and how you can do it skillfully?

I don't know how many warriors I've run into, people who just want to pick up a cause and fight no matter what; who haven't realized that the first principle of being a warrior is learning to choose your battles, realizing that some battles are just not worth fighting so that you don't waste your time and energy on unimportant issues, and can give all your strength to the important ones. In other words, you want to be able to play lots of different roles, whichever role is appropriate for this particular set of circumstances, this particular defilement of the mind, or this particular situation outside. There's a skill to bowing out, just as there's a skill to fighting. Learn to develop a full range of skills. Instead of looking at yourself as a type of personality, see the issue more as a question of what range of skills you have, where your skills have not yet developed, and where they need more work. Because the fact that you've learned to be, say, unassertive in particular situations may be due to the fact it was the appropriate thing to do in those situations. So you don't want to drop that ability entirely. Just learn that there are other situations where you have to be more assertive. Or if you tend to have kind of a rough and ready personality, realize that there are times when it's better to be a little bit more refined, a little bit more restrained.

So instead of acting out of the force of habit, you want to look at the situation outside and apply this approach. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the habits you develop outside are going to apply to your meditation. The second is that, whether we like it or not, as Buddhists in the land of wrong view we often stand for Buddhism in our actions. Whether people know we're Buddhist is not the issue. Someday they'll find out, and they'll ask, "Oh, is that how Buddhists act?" You don't want them to ask that question with that scathing tone of voice. You want them to say, "Oh, Buddhists tend to act in very appropriate ways." That's the impression you want to give because it helps them.

And it's part of your training too. As you get more sensitive to situations outside and learn that you can approach them with an expanded set of skills, you start applying the same principle inside as well. Sometimes as you're meditating and things get dry, it might be wise to drop the breath for a little while and think of a topic that gives you a little more joy, a little more inspiration in the practice. Sometimes thinking thoughts of goodwill can help provide that sense of inspiration. Or you can recollect the Buddha and what a wonderful teacher he was. Here was someone who, after his awakening, had no need for anything from anybody, and yet he spent 45 years walking all over Northern India to teach anyone who was ready to be taught. And he taught not because he wanted fame or recognition or approval from people. He taught because he had something good to share. It's really hard to find a teacher like that. The fact we have that kind of teacher is something we should take joy in. There's nothing in the

Dhamma designed to rake money our way, or to appeal to the defilements of the teacher. It's all straightforward truth, all straightforward beneficial teaching. As the Buddha said, things he would teach were, one, true; two, beneficial; and three, timely. So even though he's not here where we can see him in action, to see which teaching he would pull out for any particular situation, we can still apply his standards to learn from our own efforts.

So if you find recollection of the Buddha inspiring, use it when you need it. Other times, when the mind is getting a little bit too carried away with itself—you've probably heard that there are times when desire can be part of the path, and you say, okay, any desire must be okay; well, that's going beyond bounds—you've got to learn how to rein yourself in, exercise more restraint.

In the teachings on breath meditation, the Buddha talks about times when the mind needs gladdening, in other words, you need to give it more energy. There are times when it needs steadying, and this can include giving it more restraint, making it more solid, more still, more circumspect. And then times when it needs releasing, when you find yourself burdening yourself down with unnecessary worries, unnecessary cares: Learn how to drop them, release yourself from those burdens.

So it comes down to learning how to watch your mind and see what needs to be done, realizing that sometimes the amount of energy you need to apply to a problem is not the sort of level you normally apply. There are some people who really like to take a macho approach that whatever defilement comes up in the mind they're going to starve it. They go without food, they work themselves really hard, thinking that somehow the austerity is going to burn the defilement away. And that does work with some problems. That can be one tool you use, one tool that you keep in your tool chest, but it can't be the only tool. There are other defilements that require more precision, less brute effort, but demand a lot more from your powers of observation, so that you can understand where they're coming from.

You want to have a wide range of skills. Instead of thinking of yourself as a particular sort of person who has to behave in a certain way, or is miserable with the way he innately is, just look at things in terms of your range of skills to see where they need expanding. You've got to develop other skills as well, which may seem less in character. But you're not here to stay in character. You're here to expand your character, expand your range of skills. Because that's a lot of why we suffer in life: We don't have a full range of skills for dealing effectively with greed, anger, and delusion; for dealing effectively with difficult people; for dealing effectively with friendly people; for dealing effectively with the mind when it's down; for dealing effectively with the mind when it's up.

Instead of simply acting out of force of habit, or deciding to change your

habits in a very general way, you want to develop specific skills for specific situations. Learn how to read a situation and get a sense of what's needed. As you develop your powers of observation in this way, you benefit in lots of ways—and the people around you benefit too. Your actions are more appropriate, and you're not tied to the force of habit. In this way, defilements that were recalcitrant become a lot easier to deal with—because they have their skills too, you know. If you apply only one approach to them, they'll know you. They'll see you coming from three miles down the road because you telegraph your moves. They have their tricks, so you need to have your tricks, too. There are times when they'll respond to harsh treatment, other times they'll respond only if you treat them very gently.

So don't let yourself be limited by your sense of who you are. Know your range of skills and see where you need more practice. But think of it as that: a range of skills. You need more skills to deal with more situations. The question of who you are just gets put to the side because ultimately it's really irrelevant. The Buddha's teachings focus primarily not on types of people but on types of actions: the types of action that gives rise to suffering, the types of action that can put an end to suffering. Dependent co-arising, the four noble truths, emptiness: All the really big basic teachings are questions of action and result. That's how the Buddha wants us to look at things. That's what right view is all about: seeing things in terms of actions and their results. Then you take that insight and use it to develop all the skills you need, as wide a range of skills as possible.

When I first met Ajaan Fuang, I had a dream. I looked in his closet and saw that it was filled with all kinds of hats, each for a different role. He had a cowboy hat, a baker's hat, all kinds of hats in his closet. Then as I got to know him in real life, I realized that that's the sort of person he was: He had lots of different skills and could play lots of different roles. You could never really predict what his reaction would be at a particular time. You could depend on it in the sense that he would try to act in the most skillful way possible given a particular situation, but sometimes his sense of skillful was hard to predict.

That's an aspect of right view that we tend to overlook but it's really important. Work on your range of skills, work on your range of strategies. Because the defilements have their skills, they have their strategies. And if you establish yourself as a particular type of person, you're an easy mark for them. The wider the range of skills you have, the harder it is for the defilements to catch you.

Thoughts with Fangs

June 24, 2008

There's a passage where the Buddha teaches Rahula how to take joy in the practice. He says, "If you reflect on the things you've done, the things you've said, the things you've thought and you see that you didn't harm yourself, you didn't harm other people, that in and of itself is reason enough to take joy." Notice he doesn't say that if you reflect and see that you did better than somebody else, take joy in that. Because how do you measure "better"? If you're going to measure "better," look at yourself. Are there areas where you used to act in a harmful way but now you've learned to act in a less harmful way? Are there areas in which you used to act unskillfully and now you are more skillful? If you are going to make a comparison, make that kind of comparison.

Because the practice after all is the practice in learning how to overcome suffering. Your suffering is a totally private matter in the sense that only you can experience your own suffering. Nobody else can look into your mind and measure how much you're suffering. And you can't look into other people's minds to see how much they're suffering. So whatever basis you might have for comparing yourself in the practice with other people is totally nonexistent. Or to put it in another way, it can't be measured in any way at all.

So if you find your mind slipping into that old issue of whether you're better than other people or worse than other people, realize that both sides have fangs. When you feel that you're better than other people, you tend to get complacent. When you feel you're worse than other people, you tend to get depressed. It's one of those perceptions of *papanca*: proliferation or complication. There's contact at the senses, and from contact there arises feeling. It's an interesting passage in one of the suttas, where the Buddha starts out in a totally impersonal way like this. There's contact, and from the contact comes feeling. And then what you feel, you then label—all of a sudden *you've* come into the picture. And what you label, you think about. And what you think about, you tend to complicate. And then the complications turn around and bite you.

You've been bitten by the categories of thought that tend to complicate matters or to proliferate in this way. The big category is thinking about yourself in comparison with other people. That really has fangs. It gets you worried about issues that really are useless. The real issue is, "Are you getting more skillful in learning how not to create suffering for yourself?" This is not a narrow or selfish issue. After all, you hear about all the abuse that people inflict on others, and it's

usually because they themselves are suffering. If they weren't suffering, they wouldn't inflict abuse. To the extent to which you can learn not to suffer, you are much less likely to harm others. That's the big issue. It has nothing to do with comparing yourself as better than or worse than or even equal to other people. The whole comparing mindset is out of order here.

It's often related to the way we judge ourselves. Something doesn't go well in your meditation, something doesn't go well in your life, and you tend to judge yourself as a bad person. Something goes well and you tend to judge yourself as a good person. The reading, the judging of your *self* is what gets in the way.

When the Buddha was teaching Rahula how to look at his actions, at his words, at his deeds, the point was that he should try to purify the thoughts, the words, and the deeds. He wasn't focused on making himself a better person; the point was to learn how to respond to situations in a more skillful way. That's something you can evaluate, something you can learn from. If you make a mistake, you learn from the mistake and learn how not to repeat that mistake. If you do something well, remember that, take joy in that, and keep on training.

In other words, when you look at your actions, don't make them a gauge of how good a person you are. That's where the fangs begin, and then they start you thinking about, Well, am I better than that other person over there? Do they do a better job? Are they more generous? Are they more virtuous? Are they better meditators? Am I better than they are?" However you answer those questions, that kind of thinking has fangs because it really obscures what you've actually done and what actually can be done to improve your habits, or improve that particular action the next time that particular situation comes around. That's what the real issue is. Everything the Buddha teaches gets analyzed down into actions, intentions and their results. The intention you can gauge as to whether it's skillful or not, the results you can gauge as to whether they are skillful or not. What kind of person you are, how good or bad you are, that's not anything you can gauge at all. If you try to do it, it really gets in the way.

So your duty here is to look at your intentions, and then to see how well those intentions play out when you act on them. And learn how to judge the results. Look at things simply in terms of cause and effect, and measure the effects in terms of whether they're harmful or not, whether they lead to happiness or whether they lead to stress and suffering. It's all very simple, but we don't like things simple in that way. We like to complicate matters. And when we complicate things, our thoughts turn around and attack us.

Learn to keep things pared down and simple. While you're sitting here and meditating, for instance, how is this breath? And then how is this breath? How about this one? How is your focus? Where are you focused? Is it working? Is it getting results? If you like the results, stick with what you're doing. If you don't

like the results, you can change. As for the issue of how good a meditator you are, if that somehow pops into the mind, just let it pop out of the mind. It's really irrelevant. And it can get into the way of deeper insights.

There's a passage where the Buddha mentions that it's a sign of an untrue person who, on gaining strong concentration, uses that attainment to measure himself against other people. "I've got this attainment; they don't have this attainment. I'm better than they are, I'm a better meditator." That right there blocks the insight that could come from that attainment. The true meditator should reflect: "The Buddha teaches non-fashioning even with regard to states of concentration and attainments along the path."

"Non-fashioning" here means that you don't fashion a sense of self around these things. You simply see them as action and result. You look at the meditative state, not so much as a state, but as a product of what you're doing to create that state. And to what extent does it still involve stress and suffering? In what way could you create less stress and suffering? This reduces everything to actions and results. The type of person you *are* just gets put aside.

So when you find the mind coming around and attacking you with those thoughts with fangs, learn to remind yourself, "You're not here to compete with anybody else. You don't know who else is suffering and how much they are suffering." Even when they try to make a science out of happiness—they ask people to measure their happiness on a scale of zero to ten. Well, happiness doesn't come with little numbers like that. It's all very subjective. It's not really a science at all. So on the one hand, you can't really measure how much someone else is suffering, and two, it's really irrelevant to the issue at hand, which is how much suffering are *you* creating right now? And how can you learn to create less? That's the only issue that matters.

Remember that point and use it to cut through any other thoughts with fangs that come and attack you. And you find that just this simple analysis, cause and effect, action and result, can clear away a lot of problems and keep you focused on what's really important.

A Slave to Craving

August 5, 2008

Ajaan Suwat once made the comment that we have everything all mixed up. We look at suffering or pain as an enemy. And we look at craving as our friend. When suffering comes, we push it away or we run away from it. But when craving comes, we tend to tag along.

There's a sutta where the Buddha says that everywhere we go, we go with craving as our companion. So we think that craving is a friend. It's always there with its arm around us. But as that passage we chanted just now reminds us, we're actually slaves to our craving. It's as if everywhere we go craving has us on a leash, pulling us this way, pulling us that. And as the Buddha noted, craving takes its delight now here and now there. There's nothing really steady or dependable about it. You want this taste here. You want that sight there. You want this experience over there. It's as if it's yanking you around all the time.

And it's because of your likes and dislikes that it has you on that leash. You want pleasure, so it promises you pleasure. You're afraid of pain, so it threatens you with pain. If you don't follow your cravings, it's going to be horrible. You're going to be miserable: That's what it says. And we're not helped by the fact that modern psychology tells us if you don't go along with your desires, you're going to get all twisted and weird. And so we run along after the craving, even though it's never really produced anything that we could really hold onto for any length of time.

Where are the pleasures that you experienced yesterday? Or last week? Or the year before? They're like the vapor of your breath on a lacquer tray. You breathe on the lacquer, and barely a second later it's gone. But the vapor on the lacquer tray at least doesn't leave a trace. Sometimes the memory of your past pleasures actually leaves a bad taste in your mouth. The things you did to get those pleasures, or simply the fact that they're not coming back.

So what can you do to get beyond this slavery to craving? You've got to learn how to look, take a good hard look at pleasure and pain. Where is genuine pleasure and what is pain like? Why are you so afraid of it? To really understand these things, you have to get the mind in the right place. This is why we're sitting here meditating, so we can take a good look at pleasure, we can take a good look at pain, and come to understand them.

When you really understand, then craving doesn't have any power over you.

You cut the leash. You see how empty its promises are, and you see how empty its threats are. In other words, when you understand pleasure, you realize where genuine pleasure lies—and it doesn't lie in the pictures you create of it. Real pleasure is very different. It's something very quiet and cool here in the mind. It requires training to experience the pleasure that's really dependable and blameless, one that doesn't harm you, that doesn't harm other people, doesn't lead to intoxication. It's cool pleasure. It comes simply allowing the mind to be still for a while, not yanking it around.

Or you can stay with the breath and the breath is interesting enough, gratifying enough, pleasurable enough, so that the promise of other pleasures doesn't really pull you off course. This is part of the Buddha's strategy to show you there really are better pleasures that you can find here inside that don't cost any money. You don't put yourself in a position where somebody can catch you, like that peacock the other day. If that peacock hadn't been addicted to that birdseed, we would never have gotten it into the cage.

And you look at the human society, the way people cheat other people: It's usually the person who's looking for a quick buck or a quick pleasure who gets taken advantage of. So you're a lot safer if you can find a sense of pleasure inside. As the Buddha says, when the mind is settled in concentration and is satisfied, when it has a sense of enjoying being here, Mara can't find you. Mara can't see you. This is even before you've gained awakening.

So this is a safe pleasure. Once you see a safe and blameless pleasure, then you can look at the other pleasures you've had, and weigh them for what they really are. All those images the Buddha has in the Canon about the drawbacks of sensual pleasure: It's like carrying a torch against the wind. If you don't let go of it, it's going to burn you. Or like a hawk that's found a piece of meat. It flies off with the meat, and all the other hawks and kites and crows come and attack it. If it doesn't let go of the piece of meat, it's going to get killed. It's going to become a piece of meat itself.

A lot of these images are pretty harsh. I know a lot of people don't like them, because they really want to stay stuck on their old pleasures. But when you come from a different position, there is something really gratifying about listening to those images. It confirms what you've already seen, that the pleasure of jhana, the pleasure of concentration, is really a much better form of pleasure. And you are better off not running after those other things.

This is one way in which you begin to cut the leash that craving has on the heart. When mind is solid enough, then you can start looking at pain, either physical pain or emotional pain. If you're coming from a position of wellbeing so that you're not pushing it away, you can actually see it for what it is. For example, pain in the body—we tend to get everything all glommed together. If there's a

pain in your hip or a pain in your back, the pain and the hip and the pain and the back tend to get melded together so that the hip seems to be pain, and the back seems to be pain.

What you've done is you've taken different sorts of sensations and glued them together. On the one hand, you've got physical sensations: sensations of solidity—what they call earth; liquidity—water; warmth—fire; energy—breath, or wind. Those things are purely physical. And then on top of that, there are the sensations of pain. If you glue the pain to the earth element or the sense of solidity of your body, the pain seems solid and it becomes a lot more unbearable. But if you actually look at it, and say, “Okay, which is the actual pain and which is the sensation of solidity?” you see that they are different things. And the pain is very erratic. It moves. Comes and goes, very, very quickly. If the mind is still enough and you can look carefully enough, you can begin to see: Okay, when it moves in this way, it's because there's this perception in the mind. When the perception gets dropped, that particular pain gets dropped as well. Even though there may be a physical cause for the pain, it moves around a lot. And your perceptions try to keep up with it. And they form a bridge, from the physical pain into the heart.

If you can cut that bridge, sometimes there's the weird sensation of the pain actually going back into the heart and disappearing. In other words, it's the threat of pain that comes out of the heart that's been making you suffer. And even if the actual physical pain doesn't go away, when you can cut the bridge, you find that the heart can sit there in the midst of physical pain and not really be disturbed by it.

This way you come to understand the pain, you come to understand pleasure. When you understand these things, the promises of craving lose a lot of their appeal, the threats lose a lot of their power. You can cut the leash, so you're no longer a slave. You're not being yanked around here and there. You've seen this false friend for what it is: your slave master and a very heartless and demanding one at that.

But if you can really understand the principles of pleasure and pain and the actual motions and activities of pleasure and pain, you can get yourself out of slavery. This is why, as Ajaan Suwat said, you have to take pain as your friend, because you're going to learn an important lesson from it. But to be friends with pain, you need skill. That's the skill we're working on right now: the skill of getting the mind to be still, getting it to be mindful, concentrated, discerning.

I know a lot of people who don't like these teachings because they sound harsh, but the only way you're going to get the mind out of its complacency is to show it stark reality. You think you've got this friend, but it's your slave master. And the thing you've been running away from all the time is the thing if you

actually turn around and look into it, is going to set you free.

The Wounded Warrior

August 14, 2008

The practice of the Dharma is often compared to being a warrior doing battle with your defilements. And it's important to have a realistic view of what it means to be a warrior. The romantic view sees the warrior as someone who is always strong, always ready to take on the enemy no matter what, no matter where, no matter when. But that's not a very realistic view of how warriors operate.

Warriors have to choose their battles. And they also have to know their own strength. If they're wounded, they have to know that they've got to escape someplace where they can rest, recuperate, deal with their wounds. In other words, instead of always taking on the enemy, there are times when you have to run away from the enemy, find a place where you can gather your strength. An intelligent warrior admits his or her weaknesses. When you find that you're weak, you do what you can to make up for it. At the same time, you don't take on more than you can handle.

Ajaan Lee talks about going to the forest for lessons. When people got to be too much for him, he'd go out into the forest to hide out for a while, to rest, recuperate, deal with his wounds. And so even someone like him—with that much strength of concentration, strength of mindfulness—had to run away sometimes. We're not even anywhere near where he was, so we have to find places of rest, too—places of solace where we can work on building our strengths.

One of the lessons he learned one day in the forest came when he and some monks and novices were going on alms round, and they saw a wild hen. The hen saw them coming, made a squawk, and all her little chicks went running into a pile of leaves. So Ajaan Lee had some of the novices go out and stir the pile of leaves around with a stick to see what would happen, if chicks would run out. But they didn't. They all lay there very still. That was their protection.

So learn a lesson from the chicks. Sometimes when issues in life get very difficult, we've got to find some stillness. As you're sitting here meditating, part of you may say, "There are these issues I've got to deal with." So ask yourself: Are you up to it? If you are, go ahead. If not, just stay there in the concentration. Concentration is a form of strength. It's one of five ways the Buddha lists for strengthening the mind.

The first strength is to have conviction, first, in the awakening of the Buddha, that it really did happen, he really did awaken through his own efforts. The message there being that he was a human being. He could do it. And even though he was a special human being, he said that he wasn't using any qualities that other human beings didn't also have the potential for. So we have the potential for awakening within us as well. We've got to hold onto that conviction, whether it seems especially realistic right now in terms of the state of your mind right now. You can take comfort in the fact that you too have those potentials, that you too can develop them through your actions.

Which is the second part of conviction: that your actions really do make a difference. They are real. And the quality of your intention is what determines the results of the action that you're going to experience in terms of pleasure or pain. The solution to whatever problem there is in life starts primarily with looking at your own mind, admitting the fact you may have acted in unskillful ways in the past, but you can also train the mind to be more skillful now and on into the future. If you find that you're not ready for the other ways of strengthening the mind, you may want to sit around and just think about that for a while, gain a sense of confidence that this is true. And that will energize you.

The second way of strengthening the mind is to develop persistence, the ability to stick with something. It doesn't mean just gritting your teeth and enduring. It means learning, once you've determined what the skillful course is, how you can keep yourself on that course. You learn how to make it more attractive, more pleasant, so it's not just a matter of barreling through, because that kind of energy, that kind of barreling-through persistence wears out pretty quickly.

The Buddha made the analogy of playing a lute. You tune the main string on your lute so that it's not too tight, not too loose. And then you tune the other strings to that first one. In other words, the level of energy you have is the main determinant of what's too tight or too loose at any one time. So you figure out how much strength you have, and then how you can maintain that level of strength.

This is one of the reasons why in the breath meditation we're taught to find as much ease and fullness and energy as we can in the breath, because it's one of our allies for strengthening the mind. When the breath energy feels good in the body, the body gets stronger, and the mind dwelling in a comfortable place finds it easier to stick with the skillful path.

And then there's mindfulness: What things can you keep in mind right now that are healing to the mind? Sometimes simply reflecting on the body: If you start thinking about your emotions about this person or that person or this issue or that issue, it gets you all riled up. Just say, "I'm sitting here with a body

breathing, that's all I have to think about. That's the range of my awareness right now: being with a body in and of itself and trying to make the sensation of being with a body as pleasant as possible." Just keep that in mind.

This is what mindfulness means: keeping something in mind. You keep the body in mind. You put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any world issues, you just put them aside right now. You don't have to go there. If you go there, Mara will get you.

The Buddha talks about this being your ancestral ground, your safe place, your haven: right here the breath in and of itself. If you go out thinking about this issue or that issue outside, you're leaving your safe place. The Buddha makes two comparisons here. One is of the quail who wanders away from his safe place, a field where clods of dirt and rocks are all turned up by the plow, where he has hiding places. He leaves that and goes out to a more exposed place, where a hawk gets him. And as the hawk is carrying him away, the little quail says, "Gosh, this is my own lack of merit. I shouldn't have wandered away from my safe area. If I had stayed there, you wouldn't have been any match for me."

The hawk, being piqued a bit, says, "Well, what is your safe area?" The quail says, "It's a field where the stones and clods of earth have been turned up by the plow." So the hawk says, "Okay, I'll let you go. You can go there if you want, but you still won't be able to escape me." And so the quail flies down and gets on top of a rock, taunting, "Okay, now, come get me, you hawk! Come get me you hawk!" And the hawk, without saying anything, folds his wings and dives down after the quail. As soon as the quail sees that the hawk is coming after him in full tilt, he slips behind the rock. The hawk crashes against the rock, and that's the end of him.

In other words, see the body in and of itself as your safe place, where you can escape any issues that otherwise would overwhelm you. Just be very firm: "I'm going to stay right here. I'll try to get as much ease and comfort out of the breath as I can so I can maintain this state. For the time being, I'm not going to go anywhere else."

When you do this, you put the mind into concentration. After all, what they call the foundations of mindfulness, the establishings of mindfulness, or the four frames of reference: These are the themes of Right Concentration. If you stay here consistently enough, it turns into concentration in the mind. Then you can feed off the sense of ease and rapture that comes with the concentration: That's your food for the mind. And the body gets nourished as well, because you let that sense of ease and rapture spread throughout the body.

This provides a basis for discernment to arise: the ability to look at those thoughts that were wounding and hurtful, the issues in the outside world that

have you all upset, and to see them simply as thoughts arising and passing away. You have the choice: Do you want to go into that world, or not? If you feel obliged to go into that world, ask yourself why. “Am I ready for that world right now? Can I handle it?” If you’re not ready, try dismantling whatever values would lead you there. You’re not obliged to think about these things. And if you’re not ready to think about them, why burden the mind?

Start questioning all the assumptions that would pull you out there, whether they’re pride or whatever. Again, remember you’re a warrior. A warrior can’t let his or her pride get in the way of the healing process. You may want to look strong, to be strong, but hey, you’re not strong right now. You’re wounded. You’ve got to deal with your wounds first. That’s the attitude of an intelligent warrior, a warrior who will come out winning in the end—the warrior who knows that you’ve got to look after yourself. You can’t just go squandering your strength, squandering your troops, and think that there’s an infinite source of strength someplace. You realize your strength has its limits.

I’ve told the story before of the Chinese martial arts master whose students were going to have a demonstration of their martial arts skills in a pavilion out in the forest. At one spot along the road through the forest to the pavilion was a donkey, a donkey well known for being very obstreperous, always in a bad mood, always ready to kick anybody who came anywhere near. And so some of the students who were on the way to the pavilion said, “Hey, here’s a great chance for us to show off our skills at martial arts. We can deal with this donkey.”

And so the star martial arts student goes up first and takes one of his stances, and the donkey just kicks him across the road. The number two student comes up, says, “That’s not how you do it.” He tries a different stance, but he gets kicked across the road too. And to make a long story short, everybody gets kicked across the road. So they decide, “Wait, let’s see how our master will handle this. Maybe he’s got a skill he hasn’t taught us yet.” So they hide behind bushes on the side of the road to watch. Finally the master comes along, he sees the donkey, and he just walks way around it. Doesn’t get anywhere near.

This is part of being an intelligent warrior. You know to choose your battles, which dangers to expose yourself to, which dangers to avoid. The first lesson in Thai boxing is learning how to retreat, how to get out of a difficult situation without exposing yourself to danger. So as a good warrior, you have to know your strength. When you’re ready to take on the battle, take it on. If you’re wounded or weak, hide out someplace and figure out how to heal your wounds and build up your strength. That’s the kind of warrior who comes out winning in the end.

The Ennobling Path

August 17, 2008

The path we follow is called a noble path, both because the activities of the path are noble activities, and because it turns the people who follow the path into noble people. In other words, it's ennobling. It fosters noble qualities in the mind—qualities that make us mature, that make us adult. Qualities that in Ajaan Lee's image place us on a throne, so we're not slaves to craving out there, bending under the whip of wherever our desires may send us. It's a path that puts us in a position where we're above the desires, above our cravings. We can direct them, seeing which desires are skillful, which desires are unskillful. And learn the persistence and wisdom that enable us to follow the skillful desires and put the unskillful ones aside, seeing what truly is in our own best interest.

In other words, we sort through the imperatives our appetites place on us, and the imperatives that society places on us, learning to figure out which ones really are skillful. We need to sort out both areas because we come here with a head full of all kinds of notions—from what our parents have told us, our teachers have told us, and the mass media have told us, and our basic desires, our hungers, our appetites. That combination can be particularly dangerous because there are parts of society that would want us to follow our appetites. What was that old commercial? "Obey your thirst" so that you buy our Sprite or whatever. We have to put ourselves in a position where we can sort through those things. What lessons have we learned from society are good lessons, what impulses do we have that are good impulses? How do you foster those and how do you learn how to say No to the bad lessons and the bad impulses, the ones that are unskillful?

It's interesting that the Buddha's take on maturity is very similar to what psychotherapy has to say about maturity: the good functioning of the wise ego. Its teaching parallels a lot of the Buddha's teachings. We're often told that ego is a bad thing. Ego, in the sense of egotism or selfishness, *is* a bad thing. But the ego in the sense of learning how to function in a way that figures out what is really in your true best interest, and learning how to filter out your impulses and the voices of society: That's a very necessary function. It has to be developed if you're going to be able to stay on the path.

Psychotherapy talks about five healthy ego functions. Tonight I'd like to talk about three. All five of them have parallels in the Buddha's teachings, but these three in particular work together in ennobling the mind.

The first one is anticipation: You're able to look ahead into the future and see the results of your actions. This is a sign of a healthy ego so that you don't simply give in to your spur-of-the-moment impulses: the desire for the quick fix, the inability to delay gratification. Someone was telling me that psychotherapists have discovered that children who are trained to delay gratification do well in life. Well, that's one of those obvious things we don't need psychotherapists to tell us. You see it all around you. Kids who are encouraged to give in to their impulses are the ones who have real trouble in life. The ones who learn how to tell themselves, "No, this is not good right now; I've got to put aside my desire for the immediate pleasure for a longer-term pleasure down the road": Those are the ones who function well in life.

And it's an important part of the practice. You have to see the danger that comes from giving in to your desires. In Buddhist terms, that's heedfulness. As the Buddha said, heedfulness lies at the basis of all skillful qualities. It was so important that it was his final lesson before he passed away. You realize that there are dangers waiting out there. If you act in certain ways, they are going to have bad consequences, both for yourself and for the people around you.

So you want to develop that ability to look at your actions and see where they lead to down the line. Think, for instance, of the consequences of breaking the precepts. It's so easy to break a precept, especially when you feel that you're put at a disadvantage by the precept. We saw all that insanity after 9/11, where people were willing to throw morality out the window because they were so scared. There was even that Buddhist teacher who said, "This principle that hatred is never appeased by hatred, that it's only appeased by non-hatred, i.e. goodwill," was totally useless. Didn't have any practical application when things were so uncertain. Actually, though, that principle was designed for times when people really are seething with hatred, when they have to be reminded that you can't put aside your principles in a situation like that. When life is in danger, your first impulse may be not your best impulse at all. You need clear-cut precepts to keep reminding you that under no circumstances would you kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie, or take intoxicants. That's why the precepts are so simple, to be easy to remember in difficult situations.

And they are meant to remind you to be heedful. Think about the consequences of your actions and learn how to foresee danger. That ability is what makes you mature and it helps to ennoble you so you don't give in to your impulses. Once you see that something is going to be unskillful down the line, you have to learn how to suppress it if that desire is coming up in your mind. We don't like the word suppression. We tend to confuse it with repression. Repression is the unhealthy way to react to unskillful mental states. In other words, you pretend that they're not there. And because you pretend that they're

not there, you're in huge denial. Large parts of your awareness get cut off. Those impulses are allowed to fester in their little hidden corner of their little locked up room. But they don't stay locked up for long. That's why repression doesn't really work.

Suppression is something different. It's the ability to say No to a desire as you know it's happening. You know it's there but you simply learn how to say no. Now the approach here is not, "Just say No." The Buddha gives you ways of thinking that help you say No: the two qualities that he says are treasures of the mind, the protectors of the world—a sense of shame and a sense of compunction.

Shame is when you have enough self-respect to be able to tell yourself: I don't want to do that because it would be beneath me. This is where a strong sense of self is very helpful; a sense of self respect is very helpful here. And it includes respect for your teachers and all the people who've helped you along. You'd be ashamed to have them know that you had done that particular thing, or you're ashamed of yourself that you've taken your good training and simply thrown it away. And so shame here is not a debilitating sense that you're a bad person and that you are ashamed of yourself. It's a sense that you're a really good person. You've received good training and yet you might be thinking about following a bad action, so you realize it's beneath you. It's not in keeping with what you know to be true. That sense of shame is very helpful in suppressing unskillful desires.

Compunction is the ability to foresee a dangerous or to foresee an undesirable result of an action and say, "I just don't want to go there." This quality is based on goodwill for yourself, realizing that the little bit of pleasure that comes from an unskillful impulse now is not really worth all the danger, all the sorrow and suffering, that will come down the line. You care for yourself. This is where you show good will for yourself. This is why it's also possible to translate this quality as "concern." In other words, you're not apathetic. You don't have a "who cares?" attitude. You care. Because you realize that once you've done something unskillful, you can't buy it back.

There is that line in the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam: "The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on. Nor all your eloquence nor wit can lure it back to erase half a line. Nor all your tears wipe out a word of it." In other words, the moving finger that writes the story of your life is you, your choices. You're the one who is writing the story. And if you've written a bad action in the story or a bad chapter in the story, you can't go back and erase it.

So keep this in mind: that your actions do have consequences and you really do care about yourself. You don't want to destroy your happiness. If you can develop that sense of concern and compunction, together with a sense of shame, they really help you to say No to unskillful desires.

When you're saying No to these things, you've got to find other things that you can say Yes to. That's what the third principle is about. It's called sublimation. You take your desire for pleasure and channel it in skillful ways. This is why we have the practice of right concentration. That's the aspect of the four noble truths where the Buddha talks very openly about pleasure, rapture, a sense of fullness in the body, allowed to spread and permeate throughout the body, the way the cool water of a spring can fill an entire lake. Or lotuses growing immersed in the lake are thoroughly saturated in the water of the lake. It's really intense pleasure, really intense sense of well-being. And when you can tap into that, it makes the ability to operate on heedfulness, a sense of shame, a sense of compunction, a lot easier. You're not just denying yourself. You're learning where to channel your desire for pleasure in a skillful way.

The Buddha's realization that this was the path came after he had spent six years undergoing all sorts of self-inflicted tortures, afraid of pleasure of any kind. When he realized that that wasn't the path, he asked himself, "What might be the path?" And he remembered the time when he had been practicing jhana. He hadn't been intentionally practicing jhana, but had just sat under a tree when he was a child and his mind naturally settled into the level of the first jhana, with a sense of rapture and ease.

So he asked himself: Could this be the path? And he had an instinctive answer: Yes. "But that pleasure," he said, "Why am I afraid of that pleasure? After all, it's blameless, it's not harmful. It's not unskillful." So he made up his mind not to be afraid of it. That was the first factor of the path that he realized. If you're going to be doing concerted work on your mind, you have to be able to tap into a sense of well-being whenever you need it. Otherwise the work gets dry. As Ajaan Fuang once said, the meditation loses its lubricant. Like an engine that runs out of oil, it just seizes up.

For the path to stay alive, for you to stay on the path, requires being able to tap into this sense of well-being. Simply sitting here breathing in, breathing out, it feels good all over the body. That's the skill of right concentration. That's where you sublimate your unskillful desires and you direct them here. There is a phrase someplace in the Canon, I don't know exactly where, where the different levels of right concentration are called "the sport of the noble ones." This is where they have their fun. They find their pleasure, they find their sense of well-being, they find their enjoyment here.

So remember: The process of getting the mind to settle down should be an enjoyable process. If you find that it's getting dry, learn how to think in ways that give it a little more moisture, a little more lubricant. The Buddha talks of a person working on the process of establishing mindfulness, either in the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, mental qualities

in and of themselves. You focus on these things and sometimes it gets dry, and he says, there's a fever in the body, or a fever appearing in the mind. Even though these are the themes of right concentration, you're not finding them very easeful or rapturous. So he says to focus on a topic that you do find inspiring. It might be the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha; qualities of generosity, goodwill, any of the *brahmaviharas*; the practice of virtue. Contemplate these things until the mind feels inspired. Once it gets lubricated, you can settle down with the breath again. And you find that the mind is willing to settle down and be still.

So the practice of concentration is designed specifically to give you that sense of pleasure whenever you need it, because the work of insight is sometimes very difficult. The mind is going to resist unless you learn how to put it in the right mood.

All of these skills are the skills of a mature mind. The ability to anticipate danger, the ability to say no to unskillful desires, and the ability to channel your desires for pleasure in a harmless direction are all noble activities that bring dignity into our lives.

Years back when I first came back to the States, I was giving a Dhamma talk one night, and there was a Russian emigrée in the group. And I had mentioned the topic of dignity in the talk. After the talk, she came up to me and she said, "You know, I've been in America all these years now. I learned the word dignity when I was studying English in Russia but I've never heard the word dignity come out of an American's mouth until today." That's something to think about.

This is why we so sorely need this path in our country, this ennobling path. That's why we so sorely need it ourselves, because it's the only way that we're going to find a happiness that's noble, harmless, blameless, a happiness that allows us to maintain our dignity and our nobility.

So this is a very precious path. Learn to value it. And allow it to do its work on you, so that whatever noble qualities you have can be brought, as the texts say, to the culmination of their development.

The Wisdom of Tenacity

August 22, 2008

We come to the practice because we're looking for some wisdom in our lives. We've heard that by meditating, the mind gets to calm down; when it's calm and still it can see things more clearly. But then the question arises, what kind of wisdom are we looking for? And it's important to understand right off the bat that wisdom is not a matter of being smart or stupid. Rather, it comes from conviction in the importance of your actions. It's as simple as that. Just learning how to apply that principle across the board turns conviction into wisdom.

Normally we sometimes believe in the importance of our actions and sometimes don't. We dither around. Sometimes we don't like to think that our actions are going to yield results because we know that our actions have been unskillful. Then there are other times when we hope very sincerely that they *will* yield results because we went to the effort to do something good. And so we dither back and forth this way. As a result, wisdom doesn't arise.

Einstein once noted that if you look at the history of science, a lot of major discoveries came from young scientists, but then the same scientists tended to peter out as they got older. As he understood it, it wasn't because they got more stupid as they got older. It was simply that, as a young scientist, you're not afraid to hang on to some line of questioning to see how far it goes. You have tenacity. Whereas older scientists see lots of potential lines of inquiry and can never really settle on one or the other. Part of the problem, of course, is their sense of their impending death. They're afraid that if they latch on to something wrong, then they will have wasted their later years. Of course, if they don't latch on to anything at all, they're sure to waste their later years. But the younger scientists aren't afraid to latch on to something just to see how far it goes.

That's how the qualities of conviction and tenacity make all the difference. There's a story in the Pali tradition of two brothers, Mahapandaka and Culapandaka. The Canon doesn't tell much about them aside from the fact that they were brothers and eventually both became arahants. But in the commentary, you learn that Mahapandaka was very intelligent and Culapandaka very dumb, so dumb that he embarrassed his older brother. Still, Culapandaka eventually became an arahant. The stories vary as to how, but in each case it's a matter of Culapandaka's finally settling down with one meditation topic and really carrying through with it. It was through his tenacity that he finally figured things out.

So as you approach this question of how to give rise to wisdom in your life, you can compare the very basic wisdom teachings with the more refined ones, and you find that they're pretty much all of a piece. One of the Buddha's basic definitions of wisdom is knowing which tasks are really your business and which ones aren't, and then focusing on the ones that are your business and avoiding the ones that aren't. It sounds simple and basic, and it is. But if you really carry through with it, the implications can take you far.

What are your tasks? Well, if you want to find true happiness, one of the tasks is to develop the path. That's what we're trying to do right here: to give rise to a state of concentration. The mind could be giving rise to all kinds of other states right now, but you've got to choose. These are the states that are really worth getting the mind into. They may seem fabricated and constructed, and sometimes you wonder how something constructed like this could be worthwhile. But the mind is used to constructing things, and as long as it has this habit you might as well construct things that help take you further.

That's part of the genius of the path. You could be sitting here creating all kinds of narratives in your mind, all kinds of theories about yourself and the world around you, but where do those theories lead? If you have the idea of yourself as a bundle of needs that have to be met, that are going to pull you away from the path, you have to learn how to question those needs. Are they really needs, or are they just ideas that you stitch together out of impulses?

This is a lot of what addiction is about. You have an impulse here and an impulse there, and the mind starts stitching them together, saying, "Oh, there's a message here from my body that I really need X," even though it may be something really unskillful, really unhealthy. But it tends to take on a life of its own so that every time the impulse arises, you say, "Oh, that's a sign that there's this big massive need." In cases like that, you want to undo the theory behind that interpretation, undo the narrative, learn how to cut it up into little bits and pieces. In other words, each time an impulse comes, see it just as an impulse and watch it in and of itself.

This is where one of the more abstract wisdom teachings comes in. As the Buddha says, the strength of discernment is knowledge of arising and passing away—which we tend to equate with one of the more advanced stages of practice, but it doesn't have to be. You see an impulse arise, you see an impulse pass away, that's it. And whether there's a need lurking behind it or not, don't ask. Just watch it as an event in the present moment, and you can begin to deconstruct your belief in that massive need. You're following the task of abandoning the cause of suffering—in other words, your tendency to create enemies in your mind, ideas, urges, narratives, that really go against your own best interests—so to stitch those needs together is not your duty right now. It's not one of your

tasks. Learn to deconstruct it, to let it go.

As for what *is* your task, you learn to stitch together moments of concentration. To begin with, they may seem like momentary blips on the screen. The mind settles down for a bit and, oops, there it's gone, off someplace else. It all seems so hopeless and inconsequential. But you want to learn how to appreciate those little blips of stillness. They're small and unassuming to begin with, like house elves, but without them the mind would go crazy. Many people come to meditation wondering, "When is the mind going to settle down? I don't see any concentration at all." The problem is that it does settle down in little bits and pieces, but then we trash those little bits and pieces of concentration, those little bits and pieces of stillness. They don't seem impressive. They don't seem like anything we could rely on, so we throw them away.

This is where conviction comes in. It's not a matter of being smart or dumb, simply a matter of holding onto the conviction that these are skillful mind states. And the task is set out: If you want to find a way to true happiness, you learn how to stitch these things together. So you focus on arising and passing away, but with a specific purpose. When those moments of stillness come, you want to understand why. What did you do? When they go away, you want to understand: What did you do? You're not just watching them arising and passing away, and leaving it at that; you also have an agenda. Once you begin to notice skillful patterns of mind, you want to stitch them together. What can you do to give rise to these moments of stillness again and again and again? What can you do to keep them going once they are there?

Ajaan Lee once commented that there are three stages in the meditation. One is learning how to do it. The second is learning how to maintain it. And the third is learning how to put it to use. The doing is not all that hard. You focus on the breath, and there you are. The maintaining is what's hard. You go shooting past the breath off in the other direction to something else. Then you come shooting past it again. It's like a little kid running into the house, grabbing a sandwich, and running back out again, and then finding that he's dropped the sandwich as he's running along.

What you need to do is learn how to get a sense of balance there when you're with that moment of stillness. And this will take time. In the beginning, you put a lot of energy into it. You wonder how on earth can you ever maintain it. But as the stillness grows, it begins to give energy back to you. It becomes a positive feedback loop in both senses of the term. In other words, the more you do it, the more energy you have. The more energy you have, the more you can do it. And it's a good, positive thing.

So when you're thinking about developing wisdom in your practice, don't overlook the basics: simple things like the Buddha's comment that the difference

between a wise person and a fool is that the wise person sees the need to train his or her mind. What makes a person foolish is not seeing that need. You've got lots of smart people out there in the world who don't see that need. Their training of the mind is simply teaching it how to think in different ways and to memorize different things. When the Buddha's talking about training the mind, he's talking about developing good qualities—qualities like honesty, persistence, tenacity, conviction—which are not a matter of being smart or stupid, but simply a matter of wanting sincerely to find long-term happiness.

That's another one of his basic definitions of wisdom: It begins with the question, "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" It's a wise question because you realize that long-term happiness is a lot better than the quick fix, and that it's going to depend on your actions.

So the basic wisdom teachings are often the wisest. If you start getting off in too advanced theory, it's very easy to get lost and not even know you're lost, because you think you know more than you do. In fact, one of the most basic wisdom teachings is this: knowing that your own foolishness *is* foolishness. The fool is the person who doesn't recognize his foolishness, who feels that only the subtle, abstract teachings are good enough for him. If you remember that wisdom begins with your willingness to recognize your foolishness, that teaching will carry you far.

Ajaan Lee once made the comment that we tend to confuse things. We think the teachings that seem basic and simple aren't deep. We think the deep teachings are the ones that are abstract and obscure. But a lot of times, those abstract and obscure teachings are just words; the fact you can say them doesn't mean anything at all. The deep teachings are the ones that give us advice that's useful all the time, right here right now. Because what use is wisdom if it can't lead to long-term happiness, if it can't stop you from causing yourself to suffer?

Ajaan Lee's uses the analogy of a person who wants to find gold. He knows there's gold in the rock in the mountain. The person who thinks he's smart tends to think, "Well, all I have to do is just go out there, take a little pick, and get the gold out. I don't want the rock, I want just the gold. I'd be stupid to take the rock." But you can't get the gold out of the rock with a pick. In other words, you can't gain the Dhamma by figuring things out too much in advance. The person who's going to succeed is the one who's convinced that there's gold here, but it may take time and it may take work. But he's willing to put in the effort. He's willing to use his tenacity. You take the rock, you carry it home, and you throw it in the fire. Eventually the fire reaches the melting point of the gold, and the gold comes out on its own without your having to pry it loose from the rock.

In other words, you hold to a few basic principles and apply them across the board—in particular, this principle of knowing what's your task and what's not.

If you know what your task is, you just stick with it. As for all the other work you could be doing, you can let it go. You don't have to waste your time.

So as you sit here stilling the mind, it's like taking the rock and subjecting it to heat. Just sit here and watch as precisely as you can what's going on. If there are unskillful mental states that threaten to stitch themselves together, you learn how to cut, cut, cut all the connections. As for the skillful ones, you learn how to sew them together. That much right there is going to solve a lot of the problems of the mind.

Arising & Passing Away

August 25, 2008

The Pali word for clinging, *upadana*, has been taken into the Thai language and given an interesting meaning. The Thai word is *upataan*. And the meaning that they give is best illustrated by an example. You're sitting alone in a hut in the forest and you hear sounds outside—maybe the sound of a person walking around your hut, a little sound here, a little sound there—and the mind stitches it together to the point where you're convinced that there's a ghost outside. That's *upataan*. You create a whole narrative, you create a whole other being out there, simply out of little bits and pieces of sounds. You can stitch it into something that's really scary, overwhelming.

For a long time I didn't understand how that was related to the Pali word *upadana*, clinging. But if you stop and consider how we cling to our addictions, you begin to see the relationship. If you're addicted to a certain type of behavior, you create a whole narrative around your need for that behavior. You're a person who has that kind of need. But what do you create that sense of need out of? Little tiny sensations in the body, little thoughts that flit through the mind.

Say that you've been addicted to cigarettes. There are certain symptoms in the body that you tend to try to treat with a cigarette. After awhile, you begin to interpret those symptoms when they come as a sign of a need. You've created the need out of whole cloth. Not quite whole cloth, there are little sensations in the body, sensations in the back of your hands, and sensations in your chest, whatever. But you take these little impulses and you make them more than they are. You also create a sense of yourself around that: you are the person with that addiction, you are the person with that need.

This is a very direct way of illustrating the Buddhist principle that our sense of self can lead to suffering because we create a sense of self that actually wants something unhealthy, even though it knows it's unhealthy. The way to work around that is through the discernment that cuts through your clinging. One of the Buddha's definitions for the strength or faculty of discernment—"faculty" here being a bad translation for the Pali word *indriya*. It means more like a dominant factor in your mind, something that's powerful and strong in your mind. One of the definitions for the strength or faculty of discernment is knowledge of things arising and passing away, or simply knowledge of arising and passing away without even the "things"—just the process of arising and passing away. It's usually interpreted as a very advanced stage of vipassana or

insight.

But you don't have to wait until you're in an advanced stage. You can simply look at what's going on. What are the sensations that trigger the whole storyline that says, oops, there's that need showing itself again. Can you look just at the sensations arising and passing away? Because part of that storyline is that when they arise and pass away, they're going to come back, and they're going to keep coming back until you finally give in to them, which is a very unskillful storyline. Yes, they will come back, but they'll go away. And they'll come again and they'll go away again. If you resist giving in to them, it's not the case that they're going to grow bigger and bigger each time they return. They'll simply go away again.

Of course it's helpful to have an alternative way of dealing with those sensations. That's why we practice concentration, to give the mind a ready access to a sense of well-being that it can tap into whenever it needs. And around that sense of well-being you will create a different sense of self. You're the competent person who can access this well-being.

So you provide yourself with a different storyline, a different standing point for the mind. It's not a precarious place that's pushed around by the slightest little impulse. It can stand firm and begin to question those interpretations that you used to build around the little impulses, the storyline that says, since those impulses are going to come again, you might as well give in to them now so they don't come back stronger. But even when you give into them, they'll still come back again, and then you give in to them again—although it's hard to say that you give in to the sensation. The sensation just comes and goes. You give in to the storyline. You give your credence to the storyline that says, "I need this."

The sex drive is a great example of this. Certain symptoms arise in the body and the mind. You say, "Oops, there it goes. Got to give in." But those symptoms come and then they go. It's not that the body needs sex. It can survive perfectly well without it. The mind creates a story, a sense of self, a sense of what's out there in the world, a sense of what's inside in here that would induce you to give in to the desire for sex. But the actual impulse—if you sit through it and learn how to breathe through it, and learn how to relax the body around it—is not that overwhelming.

We talk often about this in terms of physical needs, but the body doesn't really have that many needs. It's perfectly content to die. *We're* the ones who want it to survive. *We're* the ones who want it to feed and do all the other functions we like.

So you have to look into the mind to see how the mind stitches things together in this process of *upataan*, stitching little sensations together and making a bigger deal out of them than they have to be.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has us focus on just arising and passing away; what's immediately apparent, immediately present to the mind without going into the stories of whether there's something behind it out there, or something experiencing it, or some agent in here that's experiencing it and reacting to it. Just look at the sensations coming and going in and of themselves, and you begin to realize that they don't have the force you attributed to them. The only reason you attributed that force to them is because you wanted to use them as an excuse, but when you can begin to see that they lead you in to unskillful behavior, you don't have to play along with those attributions anymore.

So the Buddha gives you a two-pronged approach here. One is to get the mind into concentration. This is why strong concentration is so essential to the path. As the Buddha said, even though you may see the drawbacks of sensual desires, if you don't have the sense of pleasure that comes from jhana, you can't withstand them. You've got to have an alternative source of happiness, an alternative source of pleasure and ease. And at the same time, you need the right way of looking at things.

When the Buddha set out dependent co-arising, he wasn't trying to impress people with what a complex idea he could cook up. Some of the most important features of dependent co-arising are right on the surface. And one of those features is just that: you look at things on the surface without trying to guess at what lies in the depths. You reduce these things to simply, "There is passing away, arising again, passing away on the surface." You see that they are not nearly as powerful as you thought they were. They are not nearly as compelling as you thought they were. That puts you in a position of greater strength.

When you learn to look at these things simply as stress arising and stress passing away, realizing that you have better ways of dealing with those simple sensations, it goes a long way toward overcoming whatever addictions you may have. The deep-seated drives you attribute to the mind are powerful because you think that they're deep-seated. When you learn to see them simply as constructs that you've placed on top of very superficial and ephemeral sensations, things that come and go very quickly, it may seem disorienting because your sense of who you are is often based around the so-called needs you've created. But when you've got an alternative way of functioning, an alternative way of seeing yourself, you're not so threatened by the idea of letting go of those old ways.

So the combination of right concentration and right view can help you pass these issues. I remember talking to a scholar who was very concerned that Buddhism not be treated as a psychology. It was more serious than that, he said, it was a philosophy, it's a metaphysics. He didn't like the idea that it was just a therapy. And I countered it by saying that I don't like the idea that it's just a

philosophy. Therapy is more important. Right view, right concentration: These are meant to be therapy for the ways the mind creates suffering for itself. Because addiction is a way it creates suffering, you want to be able to use these tools to get past your addictions: your old ways of clinging, the stories you create about the being inside and the situations outside that you stitch together out of sensations that—when you really look at them—are really not that powerful at all. When you learn how to let go of that habit of stitching things together, you find that your problems are not nearly as overwhelming as you thought they were. You can gain the upper hand.

So keep this point in mind. The Thai way of interpreting *upataan* may not quite correspond with what's in the Pali Canon, but it does give a good insight into the process of how clinging works, and how to take the clinging apart so you don't have to keep suffering from it.

Turtle Meditation

August 27, 2008

One of the reasons concentration is so central to the path is that the mind can see things more clearly when it's still. Not only that, it can feel things more clearly as well. As you get more sensitive to the breath, you become more sensitive to the whole range of energy in your body. You can see where you're holding things in, where you're covering things up.

You can also see the impact of your actions. When you're really sensitive inside—if you do something unskillful, say something harsh, or you harm somebody else—you feel it more intensely inside. That old saying that your parents often said when they were hitting you, that “This hurts me more than it hurts you,” and you didn't really believe them: It really does apply to meditators. Sometimes you say something a little bit harsh to someone else and they hardly notice it, but you feel it. It hurts.

We were talking today about some of the basic principles in the path that allow you to be more compassionate, and this is one of them: the fact that, as the mind gets more and more still, you are more and more sensitive to the energies in your body. You sense the repercussions of your words, your deeds, and your thoughts. You see that even a thought, as it appears in the mind, will have an impact on the energy in the body. In fact, when it first appears, it's on the borderline between the two.

When the mind is really still and fills the whole body, you sense little thoughts beginning to form, like little cysts or knots in your energy field. And when a thought first appears, it's hard to say whether it's physical or mental. It's both. Or it has both aspects. And if you're on the lookout for thoughts, if you're wanting thoughts, you can turn that little knot of energy or cyst of energy into a full-blown thought world. Once you get into that little world, you can travel around. Which is why we like these thought worlds. They seem to take us places.

But they keep coming back to the same old place. And the thrill of the ride often disappears very quickly. If a thought was unskillful, if involved greed, anger, delusion, lust, jealousy, fear, or whatever, it will have an impact on the mind. The mind will quiver in a certain way that lets you know that this was unskillful. And the quivering doesn't last just for a few seconds. Sometimes it goes on for a whole day. If you let yourself get involved in unskillful thoughts, spinning out thought worlds of lust or anger, then when the time comes to sit

and meditate, you find that the mind is still reverberating.

So the stillness here is a good check on your actions. One of the basic principles is that following the precepts helps your concentration, and your concentration helps strengthen your discernment. But the influences go in the other way as well. The more discernment you bring to your concentration, the stronger it's going to be. The more concentration and discernment you bring to your precepts, the less harmful your actions are going to be. Because the restraint you exercise becomes something that's not just a matter of the precepts. Anything that's unskillful, any intention that would have a harmful effect, you notice. You feel it. And it doesn't feel right.

Ajaan Suwat often commented on how when you get the mind concentrated, it becomes both tough and tender. Tough in the sense that it can withstand all kinds of unpleasant sensory contact. When the body is in pain but the mind is strong, you can be with the pain and not suffer from it. When people are being harsh with you, you can develop an energy field around the body by staying with the breath, letting the breath fill the whole body so that their energy can't penetrate your energy field. When you fully occupy your body in this way, their negative energy goes right past you. You don't suck it in. You don't absorb it. So in that sense, the concentrated mind is tough.

But it's tender in the sense that it becomes very sensitive. And particularly, you become sensitive to your own actions so that your virtue is not simply a matter of the precepts. It becomes a deeper quality of the mind so that even though the things you do may not be against the precepts, but if they're harmful, you know. And that knowing helps refine your restraint.

This is a point Ajaan Lee made in his book *The Craft of the Heart*. And I think he picked it up from Ajaan Mun, because a lot of the Dharma in *The Craft of the Heart* comes from Ajaan Mun. The precepts help concentration and discernment, concentration helps your precepts and your discernment, and your discernment helps your concentration and your precepts. These three aspects of the path help one another along.

This combination of tenderness and toughness: A good image for a meditator is a turtle. The turtle's body is one of the most sensitive bodies in the whole lizard kingdom. So it needs that shell for its protection. In the same way, you want the toughness of concentration to protect you from being weak in the face of adverse conditions, so you don't pick up negative energies, so you don't get knocked off course by unpleasant sights, or sounds, or smells, or tastes or tactile sensations or ideas. That's the toughness you want.

As for the tenderness, it's a tenderness inside, where you're sensitive to the slightest thought, the slightest word, the slightest action. It's possible to meditate

and get concentrated and not have this kind of sensitivity because your concentration isn't imbued with discernment. There are people who can get their minds thoroughly concentrated and still be very harmful to others because their concentration is one-sided, narrow, loaded with denial.

But when your concentration is the sort that fills the whole body and it's imbued with discernment—this is the kind of concentration you're developing here as you work with the breath—the more sensitive you get to the slightest variations in the breath, the more sensitive you are to the least little bit of stress that you're causing yourself, the more you're imbuing your concentration with discernment. Then as you spread the breath to fill the whole body, or spread that sense of ease to fill the whole body, the range of your concentration is such that your gaze becomes all around. The text talks of the Buddha as an all-around eye. And what they mean is that his whole body was sensitive. The range of his gaze was 360°. That's the kind of quality you want to develop in your concentration so that it becomes a basis for skillful action in every aspect of life, both inside and out.

As you meditate, you're exercising the four brahmaviharas. Goodwill, in terms of the concentration practice or focusing on the breath, means that you want the breath to be as comfortable as possible. Compassion here means that when you find that it's uncomfortable, you do what you can to make it more comfortable, make it more pleasant. If it's already pleasant, then you exercise empathetic joy, appreciating the fact that you can do it. You hear of some meditators who feel that they don't deserve the pleasure that comes from meditation. They feel uncomfortable feeling happy. If you find that you have that problem, recognize it as a problem. You're not being realistic, you're being one-sided. Learn how to appreciate the fact that yes, you can get the breath to be comfortable, and the body can be filled with a sense of ease and well-being, and that there's no issue of deserving or not deserving this pleasure. It's something that you can learn how to use skillfully, both for your own sake and for that of others, so don't shy away from it.

Then there are areas where you can't make the breath comfortable no matter what: That's when you exercise equanimity. If there are parts of the body that are painful and the breath can't do anything for the pain, you learn how to exercise equanimity there. This way you're getting practice in the brahmaviharas, learning how to develop a goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity that are universal, limitless. Then you learn how to apply these different emotions as appropriate.

So as you get more sensitive inside, it puts you in a better position to be more sensitive to what you're doing outside, more sensitive to what the appropriate approaches might be. In this way the practice of meditation is not selfish. The

idea that it's selfish is based on the idea that your well-being has to conflict with the well-being of others, that you have to choose one or the other. The Buddha's insight was that if you look for genuine well-being, you find that it doesn't conflict with anybody else's well-being. It actually fosters theirs. One common image is of candles. Each person is holding a candle. You have a lit candle. The fact that yours is lit means that you can help light other people's candles. Your flame is not diminished. And over time, as more candles get lit, they bring more and more brightness for everyone.

True Protection for the World

August 31, 2008

People sometimes ask: With all the evil out there in the world, with people willing to kill in order to maintain their power and wealth, how can you sit here with your eyes closed? There are two answers to that. One is that we're not just sitting here with our eyes closed. We're training the mind. When you understand that, the other answer is: How can you *not* sit here and train your mind given all the bad examples out there in the world, all the dangers out there in the world? Where else are you going to find the strength to maintain your virtue, to keep your goodness alive? The nourishment that keeps your goodness alive has to come from within.

Your goodness is something that has to be independent of whether other people are good or bad. Otherwise your virtue is not dependable. And that's one of the scariest things there is in the world: when you realize you can't depend on your goodness. You can't depend that you will always be kind and compassionate. If the mind's food source is outside, there can always come a point where when you feel that your food source is threatened, and you'll want to fight back.

When your happiness depends on things outside, it's not just the case that your happiness can be threatened from outside, but your goodness—your determination not to harm anyone, not to engage in violence—can also be threatened from within. You run up against lines that you've drawn: "As long as this isn't threatened, I'm okay. If this gets threatened, then there's trouble."

But if your happiness base is within, it's secure. Your goodness is secure. And that's important. Because what do we have as our treasures in life? Our own actions. The material things that we use, the relationships that we have, those are not really ours. We use them for a while, and we take care of them for a while, but then we get separated. *Sabbe sankhara aniccati*. All things fabricated, all things conditioned, are inconstant. They're stressful, not self. You have to think long and hard about that.

When you do, you realize that the only way to respond to that reflection is to try to find something of solid worth inside. That has to be your top priority, so that you can find a goodness that's unassailable, something that's truly dependable, that nobody else can touch. Once you've got that, you're safe. You can trust yourself as you go into the world and deal with untrustworthy

situations or untrustworthy people, knowing that they can't touch what's really valuable inside. The world needs more people like this. If the Buddha had waited until the world was straightened out before he was going to go for awakening, he never would've gotten there.

You have to work for awakening, for inner perfection, in the midst of an imperfect world. You're as generous as you can be. You're as virtuous as you can be, both because it's good for the world and because it's good for you. You spread goodwill to all beings without thinking about whether they deserve your goodwill, because *you* need your goodwill. You need your goodwill for all beings because that's the beginning point in learning how to be trustworthy in your dealings with everybody, people good or bad. If there are people out there that you think don't deserve good treatment, don't deserve your goodwill, you're not going to treat them well. Then that becomes your karma: your lack of skill. Some people believe that you have goodwill for other people because everybody has Buddha nature, as if only Buddhas were deserving of your goodwill. But if you realize that anybody out there is going to be subjected to your actions, you want to make sure that the impact you have on that person is harmless. Only then are you safe.

This is why all the Buddha's teachings are considered to be protections. They're part of our refuge to protect us from ourselves, from our own lack of skill. We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, not in hopes they are going to come down and save us, but because they're good examples. You think of the example they set, or the hardships the Buddha went through in order to find awakening, and the standards of the Dharma that he left behind, and that inspires you to find protection in those standards, to follow his example, as well.

There's that famous simile of the two-handled saw. The Buddha said that if bandits were to capture you, pin you down, and to saw off your limbs with a two handled saw, anyone who would direct ill will toward those bandits, would not be doing his teaching. This is an extreme example but it's meant to be extreme so that it will stick in your mind, so that when other people say harsh things, or do harsh things to you, or to those you love, or to those you feel sympathy for, you can't wish ill to those people, because you realize they're creating a lot of bad karma for themselves. This is a part of compassion. When you see people who are creating the causes for suffering, you've got to have compassion for them, even if they haven't yet started suffering yet from that.

This is an extension of goodwill. The four brahma-viharas, or sublime attitudes, basically come down to two. There's goodwill and then there's equanimity. Then goodwill gets applied. When you see people are suffering or are creating the causes for suffering, you feel compassion for them. When people are happy or creating the causes for happiness, goodwill means that you rejoice in

their happiness, or the wisdom of their actions. You appreciate what they're doing, or what they're experiencing. That's goodwill applied.

Then there's equanimity. When you realize that certain things are beyond your control, either because of that person's past karma or your past karma—people for whom you wish well but they keep on doing unskillful things or they are suffering in ways that you can't stop—you have to have equanimity there so that you don't waste your time trying to change things you can't change. That way you can focus your time and energy on areas where you *can* make a difference.

This is one of the reasons why we have that chant on the four brahmaviharas every evening before meditation, to remind us of our motivation in the practice. We need those attitudes, both to help immediately in the course of the meditation, and to carry into our daily life to protect ourselves from our own unskillful impulses, our unskillful intentions—so that we can become our own refuge.

In other words, when you internalize the example of the Buddha, and the Dharma becomes part of your daily behavior in your thoughts, your words, and your deeds, there will come a point where you touch the Deathless. And from that point on you become a true refuge for yourself, and a refuge for others. Again, you can't save them from their unskillful behavior. But you become an example for them. You're part of the Sangha refuge, or the gem of the Sangha.

So this practice of sitting here with your eyes closed training your mind is not a selfish thing. It's protection for yourself so that you eventually become a refuge for others. We can't wait until the world gets straightened out before we straighten out our own minds, because the cause is in the mind. The world out there is the realm of effects. The realm of causes is in here: That's one of the basic lessons of dependent co-arising. All the causes of suffering come prior to your engagement with the world. If you want other people to change their behavior, you've got to straighten out your behavior. You have to walk your talk, so that your talk is compelling. You can't force other people to follow your example, but at least you establish that example here in the world. It's good to have these examples in the world. Otherwise the world would be a totally depressing place.

So as you remain true to the practice, you learn the truth of the practice. That's what's special about the Dharma. Unless you are true, you can't find the truth of the Dharma. And then you can embody that truth in your actions, in your words, in your thoughts. That's when it becomes a kind of protection.

There's a passage in the Canon where King Pasenadi comes to see the Buddha. Pasenadi is an interesting character. He starts out totally clueless, but he gains faith in the Buddha, begins spending time with the Buddha, and starts

thinking about the Dharma on his own. He comes to the Buddha every now and then, and he reports, “You know, I’ve been thinking about this, and I realized x , x , x ,” whatever the issue is.

In this instance he’s been sitting in judgment on a court case. That was what kings did back in those days. They didn’t have judges. The kings themselves were the judges. He told the Buddha he had been sitting on a court case where people who were wealthy and had everything they should need were still willing to lie and cheat and kill in order to get more wealth. He said, “I’m sick and tired of judging this human race. People never have a sense of enough.” And the Buddha said, “Yes, that’s the way it is. You will never get people to a point where they have a sense of enough unless they start looking elsewhere for their happiness aside from material things.”

At another point Pasenadi tells the Buddha that he’s suddenly realized that people who spend all their time building up armies aren’t really protecting themselves. As long as they’re still acting on greed, anger, and delusion, they leave themselves wide open for suffering. And the Buddha says, Yes, that’s right. Armies are not a protection. Your good karma is your protection. Your good thoughts, your good words, your good deeds: those are your protection; protection against yourself, your own unskillful habits and protection against the unskillful habits of other people.

So as you meditate, you’re creating protection: protection for yourself, protection for the world. The best protection that a human being can create. Don’t ever let yourself be swayed from this practice.

To Be Your Own Teacher

September 3, 2008

Once when I was in Thailand, I happened to attend a funeral for Ajaan Kokaew, who had been a student of Ajaan Sao. During the funeral I met a monk who mentioned to me that he knew he couldn't live with any ajaan. He was too bullheaded and would get into a lot of trouble. He wanted to go off and stay in the forest by himself. So he had gone to Ajaan MahaBoowa and asked him, "How can I make sure that my practice doesn't go off course?" And Ajaan MahaBoowa responded with a standard teaching in the Canon about three practices that can't go wrong: restraint of the senses, moderation in eating, and wakefulness.

So as you're looking after your own practice, learning to be more and more responsible for looking after yourself, it's good to keep these three principles in mind. When you keep them in mind, you're a lot less likely to go off course.

The first one, restraint of the senses, is defined as learning how to see the little things that set the mind off. When you look at something, what are the details that set you off? And then you learn how not to focus on those details. Notice this means that instead of putting blinders on yourself and not looking or not listening to things at all, it means that you really examine the *way* you look and the *way* you listen, trying to find, when you look at something, what exactly is it that excites your lust, or excites your anger? And the same when you listen. What precisely are the features of what you're listening to? It may be the tone of voice that sets you off, or it could be the actual things that are being said. And so on down the line with all the senses. You try to look more carefully at how you look and listen, sniff aromas, and taste flavors.

When you do that, you begin to see that the little details don't really amount to much.

There really isn't much there to get worked up about. You start looking around the details and you begin to see that there's a lot of stuff that, instead of exciting your lust, would discourage it; instead of exciting your anger, would calm your anger. Which means that you have to look in a more all-encompassing way; you have to listen in a more encompassing way. Note, though, that if you find the little details still set you off, just learn not to focus on those details. Focus on something else, something that might be neutral or actually counteracts the response you have to the original details.

But as you work more and more with this principle of restraint of the senses,

you come to see how the little details that set you off are really very minor, very incidental. If you look at the process of how the mind goes about looking and listening, you see that the details themselves are not that much. Your motivation to go looking and listening to begin with: That's one of the big problems.

In this way this practice turns you back more and more on the mind and its intentions. That's when you begin to see that process of flowing out that Ajaan Lee talks about. He says, you have your basic awareness, then the mind goes flowing out. And the flow is the *asava*, it's the effluent there. It's either sensuality, views, becoming, or ignorance—one of these four—that causes you to go flowing out after sights and sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas.

So when you engage in this practice and keep after it, you find that there is lots of material for practice all throughout the day, even when you're doing other things aside from sitting and meditating. There's a lot to contemplate about how you're going through life, what motivates the way you engage in the world. If you see something unskillful, you figure out ways to keep it in check either by simply saying No to it, or after a while of saying No again and again and again, you begin to see there's a kind of pressure that builds up behind the impulse. And the more you acknowledge the pressure, the more it will explain itself. The mind will start making demands. If it insists on that piece of candy—eye candy or ear candy or nose candy, whatever—you can start understanding it better, where it comes from, and why.

So this is a good practice, not only for getting the mind to learn how to avoid the issues that would disturb its concentration, but also to gain understanding, gain discernment into how it tries to look for food in the senses, and learning how to do it more skillfully.

Moderation in eating means that you watch what you're doing while you eat. Notice your motivation for wanting a little bit more of that food, a little bit more of this. It's a good exercise for figuring out: Exactly at what point are you really full? And the mind will say, "Well, I need more. After all, there's just one meal a day. I've got to stuff in a little extra for the evening, a little extra for all the work I'm going to be doing." And try saying No to that voice.

Ajaan Chah says to eat until the point where you know that in five more mouthfuls you're going to be full. Stop at that point and then just fill yourself up with water. To do this requires real sensitivity, noticing not only when you are full, but also when you're five mouthfuls away from full. And remind yourself of the advantage of not overeating. You're not weighed down. It's a lot easier to meditate soon after the meal. And you can begin to question what the mind's demands are on how much it needs and how much what it eats is going after the flavor.

This connects to restraint of the senses, in the sense of taste. When you're eating something, exactly how long does the good taste last in your mouth? Not that long. It's very short. At the same time, if there's a demand—"I need X-amount of calories, or X amount of protein or whatever"—experiment to see how much you really need. Try doing with less and less for a while, and see how the body responds.

So in this way too, moderation in eating gives you a chance to improve the conditions for concentration and to gain some discernment into your motivation: why you eat, what you're looking for when you sit down and start putting food into your mouth.

Wakefulness, in the texts, is defined as follows: During the day, divide your time between sitting and walking as you practice. In other words, give the whole day to the meditation. And then at night, spend the first watch of the night sitting and walking, trying to banish any sleepiness from the mind. During the second watch of the night, which is roughly 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., you rest. But when you lie down, you lie down mindfully, with the intention that as soon as you wake up, you're going to sit up. You're not just going to turn over and lie there, enjoying the posture of lying down. Then you spend the last watch of the night sitting and walking again, trying to banish sleepiness from your mind.

Now you may find that you have to adjust this in terms of how many hours you personally need. But two points are important. One is that when you lie down, you lie down with the intention that as soon as you wake up, you're going to get up and immediately try to continue with the meditation.

During the rest of the day if you're not meditating, ask yourself why. You may have some good reasons. You've got chores to do, this and that, but you can meditate while doing the chore. And if you don't have a good reason for not doing formal meditation, make it a habit that you just drop whatever it is that you're planning to do. This way you can ride herd on yourself, so the ajaan doesn't have to ride herd on you. You become more responsible in your meditation.

Ajaan Fuang describe this as being like a teacher who keeps after the students, making sure that they do their lessons in line with the lesson plans for the day. Other people can't ride herd on you in anyway near the way you could ride herd on yourself if you really wanted it. You have to learn how to do this in such way that you don't push, push, push and then snap. Part of being a responsible mature meditator is knowing how much you can take. But you don't want to push your limits; you want to push the envelope. Our general tendency is for our idea of moderation to be pretty slack. So you could learn how to push yourself too hard for a while, and then back off from that a little bit until you find the point that's just right. And for each of us, this is going to be a different

point in terms of how much sleep you need, how much you can push yourself in the practice. But the important principle is you learn to be responsible for yourself—because this is how discernment is developed.

All these practices are aimed at developing discernment. That's why they can be a guideline for someone who's practicing on his own or on her own. This is not just a matter of setting up rules and abiding by them, but it's also learning sensitivity to what's actually going on: what pushes you when you're looking at things, what pushes you when you're eating things, what pushes you when you're making your choices for what you're going to do each hour of the day. Learn how to question any impulses that seem to be unskillful, how to encourage the ones that are skillful, and how to ride herd on yourself in a way that really is sensitive to what's just right. For this ability to find what's just right is an extremely important principle in developing discernment.

So the more you can become your own teacher, the better. The discernment that's involved in becoming your own teacher is going to be essential for release. Discernment is not just a matter of seeing things in line with the texts; it's a matter of learning how to watch your own mind, question your impulses, look at your intentional input into any situation. And the best way to see that intentional input is to start asking questions about when it's skillful and when it's not. As you get more and more sensitive to what's skillful, more and more sensitive to what's unskillful, your powers of observation become more and more refined. You become sensitive even to the slightest intentions. And it's in seeing those intentions, skillful or unskillful, allowing them to disband at the appropriate time: That's when your practice allows you to see something more.

The Context for No Context

September 16, 2008

The Buddha once said that if you look back at your life or your many lifetimes, you won't be able to find a point where you could say, before this there was no ignorance and then ignorance began. We're all coming from ignorance, which in technical terms means that we're coming from a position where we don't really see the four noble truths. We don't see our life in terms of the four noble truths. We have our own terms, our own narratives of who we are, our beliefs about the world, all kinds of knowledge and theories that actually get in the way of looking at where there's stress and suffering, what's causing it, and what we can do to put an end to it.

So ignorance is not just a lack of knowing. Sometimes it's composed of different kinds of knowledge, but knowledge that doesn't look at things in terms that will actually put an end to suffering. When you begin to realize that your knowledge isn't working: That's the beginning of true knowledge. As the Buddha once said, if you recognize your own foolishness, that's the beginning of wisdom; to that extent are you wise. Regardless of how much you may know, if you realize that your knowledge is not putting an end to suffering, there must be some better way of looking at things: That's the beginning of wisdom. And you can cut through your ignorance by learning to look at things as they happen simply as events, whether they're things outside of you or things in your own body and mind.

The Buddha says, practice looking at these things simply as things that are separate. You see your body as something separate, your feelings as something separate; your perceptions, your thought constructs. Even your sensory consciousness: You have to see that as something separate—separate both in the sense that these are individual events that arise and pass away, and in the sense that they're separate from your awareness, your sense of you. You want to pare back your sense of you because as long as you claim something to be you or yours, you can't really see it clearly. There's bound to be a liking or disliking, or holding on that prevents you from seeing when something arises, exactly why does it arise? And what effects does it carry in its train?

This is why the beginning of meditation starts with simply looking at the body in and of itself, simply as a body; or feelings in and of themselves, mind states in and of themselves, mental qualities in and of themselves, simply as events that are happening, something separate from your awareness of them. This

allows you to begin seeing how they fit into the causal pattern that either leads to suffering or leads away from suffering. In other words, we take our experience and take it outside of its ordinary context, our narratives about who we are and how we interact with other people, or our views about the world as a whole.

One of the interesting things about the Buddha's teachings on the four noble truths or on dependent co-arising is that they contain a long list of causes and effects, but they're not placed inside a context. "Who is this happening to?" The Buddha says, "Don't ask." "Is there anybody there?" "Don't ask." "Is there somebody there?" "Don't ask." "Do these things exist or not exist?" "Don't ask." Just look at them as events arising and passing away. Which means that we have to learn how to get our minds out of their ordinary context where we have a view of the world, and based on that view of the world we sort everything else out in those terms. The Buddha wants us to erase that context so we can just see things as they arise, as they pass away, and how they influence one another, simply as events that you can watch in the present moment. He even has us view our world views and self-views in terms of their arising and passing away.

So in that sense, while we're meditating, we're trying to get our minds outside of their normal context. But getting the mind outside of that context requires a certain kind of context as well. When the Buddha talks about the ability to put the mind in this position where you're seeing things arising and passing away, it requires a whole series of aids in the practice, many of which are not just meditation techniques. They go back through the way you act in your day-to-day life: what you listen to and give credence to, what you respect, and the people you hang around with. These things help put the mind in the right context where it can then drop the context.

For example the Buddha talks about how it's necessary to have right conduct in body, speech, and mind. This is why we have the precepts, because if you don't hold by the precepts it's hard to be really honest about what your actions are and what their results are. If you've been harmful to other people, you don't like to think about it. And as we all know, what happens then is either that you think about how you've been harmful and you start getting depressed and tied up in remorse; or you start going into denial: You didn't really hurt them, or they don't really matter—that kind of thinking, which makes it difficult for you to see things as they actually arise and pass away.

So the precepts are meant to support meditation practice. And we listen to the Dhamma as a support for our precepts to keep us on the right path. To listen to the Dhamma, we have to associate with what they call admirable friends, people who exemplify the Dhamma in their actions. This is for two reasons. First, it's hard to listen to the Dhamma and believe it if you see that the person teaching the Dhamma isn't abiding by the Dhamma. Second, there's more to the

Dhamma than just words. There are habits, attitudes that can't be put into words, but can be sensed. You pick them up just by hanging around a person.

So there's a social context for the Dhamma, a social context for the practice that puts an end to ignorance: a social context for the ability to develop a mind state that goes beyond social context.

This means that as you're practicing there are two things you want to keep in mind. One is your ability to make the mind strong enough to meditate in any context. And two, you make sure that you're creating the right social context both for yourself and for the other people who are here. Ideally we're here to be admirable friends to one another, to be exemplary in our conduct. We don't have to teach one another the Dhamma. In fact it makes life a lot more difficult for me if you're out there teaching one another.

It's like the man I met from the Yukon. He said if he's out in the forest and he encounters a bear, he's a lot more comfortable if he's the only person there. If there are other people, he finds it harder to read the bear. So you don't have to be teaching the Dhamma to one another, but in your actions you should be examples of the Dhamma to one another. It makes it a lot easier for us to practice together.

This starts with simple things like showing respect for the place we have here. We're living off of other people's generosity. Always keep that in mind. I've been told over the past week or so that people have been very careless about leaving the lights on. You may have noticed that the generator gets turned on every morning automatically when the batteries go too low. Solar electricity is essentially free, but when we use too much of it, we have to generate electricity, which uses up fuel.

So pay attention to simple things like that. Show respect for the situation around us, for the things that people have provided for us so that we can practice. The practice starts there, and it builds up. When you talk with one another, try to be frugal in your words. Remember that each of us is here to learn how to develop quietude. If your speech is going to disturb someone else's quietude, make sure there's a good reason for it.

Ajaan Fuang always said, before you say anything, if you want your words to help in the practice, ask yourself: Is this really necessary? If it's not, don't say it. As we go through the day, look for the little things you can do to help one another. If you notice some slack anywhere, take up the slack. We're operating on a voluntary system here, what they call an economy of gifts—which means that some things get done, some things don't. If you see that something is not getting done and you're in a position to do it, go ahead and do it. If something's not clean, something's not in order, you're not here serving anybody. We're all here

developing good qualities in our minds, and cleaning up a mess is a good way of developing those qualities. In this way our mutual presence becomes admirable friendship, which helps us in the practice.

So you want to help create an ideal environment for the practice, and then use that environment to strengthen the mind so ultimately it doesn't have to depend on a particular environment, a particular context. You can meditate anywhere regardless of the situation. This is a really necessary quality of mind because life is uncertain. You can't always guarantee that this place will continue to be as quiet and as conducive as it is right now. We can't always guarantee that we will stay here. Some of us have to go. Some of us think we're going to stay, but who knows what's going to happen?

This way we're using our context to develop the quality of mind that can drop the context. For example, as you're sitting here right now: As Ajaan Lee used to say, don't think that you're sitting here in a meditation hall. Think that you're sitting way out in the wide open, all alone. There's nobody around for you to worry about. There's simply you and the breath, you and the body. As you focus on the breath and on the body, that sense of "you" sitting there is going to get pared away, too, as you begin to recognize more and more the factors of mind that keep you with the breath, keep you with the body, and the factors of the mind that pull you away. If anything pulls you away, learn how not to identify with it. No matter how intriguing it may seem, no matter how much it may just seem to be your habitual way of thinking, you've got to learn how to drop it, drop it, drop it; step back from it, look at it as something separate, simply as an event that's conditioned by other events and is going to condition other events down the line.

This way you learn how to cut through the ignorance that keeps you suffering. You begin to see how the different contexts you create around these events place burdens on you, whether they're actively unskillful or just relatively skillful. The fact that you have to create these contexts means that you're constantly keeping them alive, keeping them going. If you don't maintain them, they pass away.

You want to learn how to put the mind in a situation where it's totally free from context, simply looking at events as they arise and pass away. As the Buddha says, ultimately right view gets to the point where you don't see things as existing or not existing. No sense of self gets built up around them. Even the concept of existence or nonexistence doesn't get built up around them. There are just pure events: stress arising, stress passing away. And that's when you learn to see what lies beyond the stress.

In this way, we're trying to create a context here in which the mind can get free of contexts. It may seem strange that we have this double duty, but this is

what works. Have a sense of time and place, of when to work on keeping the context here as conducive as possible, and when to drop the context. We all have chores. We all have duties and responsibilities here to some extent. But you have to learn how to wear them lightly. Think about them when things need to be thought about; and otherwise, drop them. Just be with the breath, just you and the breath. Over time there will be less and less you, and even less and less breath.

That's when things get really light, because we see that we don't have to keep maintaining ignorance the way we have been for so long. As Ajaan Suwat once said, ignorance is like darkness. Even though the darkness may have existed for eons, as soon as you light a light, the darkness doesn't have any right to say, "Look, I've been here for a longer time, the light doesn't have any right to drive me away." As soon as knowledge arises, it can cut through the ignorance that's been here for so long. So do what you can to give it the chance to arise, this light of knowledge, both as you sit here with your eyes closed and as you go through the rest of the day.

The Uses of Equanimity

September 24, 2008

When the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son, Rahula, he first gave him an exercise in developing patience and equanimity. It's important to see how the two practices are related, because they show that equanimity doesn't mean passivity, or simply accepting things as they are and leaving them at that. Rather, it's meant to serve a purpose—to allow you to see more clearly, to learn how to accept what can't be changed, but also to look for what *can* be changed, where you can make a difference. Even when you accept the fact that there's a lot of suffering in life, it doesn't mean that you stop there. You look for the area where there is no suffering, where suffering can be put to an end.

When the Buddha taught Rahula, he said, "Start out by making your mind like earth. When disgusting things are thrown on the earth, the earth doesn't shrink away." We can also add that when wonderful things are thrown on the earth, the earth doesn't get excited. The Buddha then said, "Make your mind like water. When water has to wash away disgusting things, it doesn't get disgusted. Or like fire: when fire burns disgusting things, it doesn't get disgusted. Or when wind blows away disgusting things, the wind isn't disgusted. It stays unchanged. Make your mind like that."

But the Buddha didn't stop there, simply with acceptance. He wasn't teaching Rahula to be a clod of dirt. He went on to teach breath meditation, and breath meditation isn't simply accepting the breath whatever way it is. It's very proactive. "Learn to breathe," he said, "sensitive to the whole body. Calming the way you breathe. Train yourself to become sensitive to where there's pleasure, to where there's a sense of refreshment or rapture in the breathing. Notice how these feelings have an effect on the mind and then allow them to grow calm."

What this means is that, building on equanimity and patience, you become proactive. In other words, the equanimity and patience are designed to make you see clearly. When you lack equanimity, you react immediately to whatever happens and you don't get to see, "Well, what happens if I just sit with this for a while? Where does it lead?" When you're equanimous, you can begin to see cause and effect more clearly over the long term, without being blinded by your knee-jerk reactions. You can watch stress with the purpose of seeing what causes it, what arises together with the stress. The stronger your equanimity, the more you can see.

So equanimity and acceptance are not an ends in and of themselves. They're a means to knowledge, the knowledge we develop around the four noble truths: looking for the stress, trying to comprehend it to the point where you can see what's causing it, what activities you're engaged in that are contributing to the stress, and learning how to stop those activities, to drop them. That's where you let go.

Essentially, equanimity allows you to learn the terrain. When you know the terrain, you can find the path. Life doesn't necessarily follow your wishes, but if you're patient enough and observant enough, you begin to see that it does offer opportunities for an end to suffering. That's essentially the Buddha's message. You want to develop your powers of observation so you can see that for yourself.

This is why we practice concentration: to get the mind solid in the face of whatever comes up. But that solidity has to come from learning how to develop strengths: a sense of well-being, a sense of ease inside the body, an ease inside the mind, so as to assist in keeping you solid.

The secret to patience or endurance is to focus not on the hard things you have to endure, but on where you can still find sources of help, sources of strength. Learning how to be with the breath in a way that induces feelings of pleasure, feelings of rapture or refreshment is an important source of strength both for the body and for the mind.

This provides you with a general pattern that you can use throughout life. When you run into limitations, you test them first to make sure they really are limitations. If you find that they are, you look for other areas where you can make a difference.

There was an old woman in Thailand, a doctor, who went with a friend to see Ajaan MahaBoowa. The friend was suffering from cancer, and the two of them stayed with Ajaan Mahaboowa for several months. While they were there, Ajaan Mahaboowa gave a Dhamma talk almost every night for the woman suffering from cancer because she knew she was going to die. The woman with cancer taped every Dhamma talk, and after she died, they found she had left behind a lot of tapes. So the old woman doctor set about transcribing the tapes, and ended up with two very large books. As she said in the preface to the books, one of the lessons she had learned from Ajaan Mahaboowa was that as you grow old and find yourself running into limitations, look for the areas are where you still have strength, where you still can make a difference, where you can still offer something of goodness to the world. She was still strong enough to transcribe the tapes, so that was her offering.

There's a similar lesson in the Canon. A couple of old brahmans go to see the Buddha, and say, "We're now old. How should we live as we are old?" And the

Buddha replies, “You can still be generous.” Even though there are limitations on your strength, there must be *some* ways you can be generous to the world. Look for those. This principle applies all throughout the practice. You’re sitting here. You find that there are areas in the body that are painful. You can ask yourself, “Which parts of the body aren’t painful? How can you breathe in ways that will induce a sense of ease in those parts the body so that sense of ease becomes stronger?” Then you can begin to use those parts as a foundation, as a source of strength in dealing with the pain.

So things don’t just stop with equanimity. The purpose of equanimity is to see more clearly. When your mind is more even and still, it’s less likely to be swayed by events. That way it can watch things as they actually happen. And you see that there’s still an opening. Even when you face death, you realize there’s part of the mind that doesn’t die. As for the things that do die, you have to develop equanimity for them. And more than just equanimity: You have to learn how not to identify with them.

The Buddha talks about different levels of equanimity. There’s the equanimity that simply comes from intentionally keeping your mind calm and balanced in the face of input of the senses. He calls that equanimity based on multiplicity, i.e., the multiplicity of the senses. Then there’s the equanimity based on singularity, when you get the mind to a sense of oneness in strong concentration. This is more solid, more secure, because you have something really singular and solid to base the equanimity on, and not just a reminder that you want to stay equanimous, or should stay equanimous. You’ve got a real foundation that lies beyond the reach of a lot of sensory input.

But even that isn’t enough, because if you don’t go further you’ll start identifying with that solid sense of equanimity. As long as you have to identify with something, it’s a good thing to identify with, but if you want real freedom, the Buddha recommends learning how to see where you’re creating a sense of “me” and “mine” around that equanimity, in the narratives you build about where you are.

First you can practice applying this sort of analysis to other things. Once the mind is still, you can look at other affairs in your life to see what kind of narratives you’ve built around them—your identity as a painter, a cook, a carpenter, a musician. Of course, aging and death can get in the way of those identities. So you can ask yourself, “Does my happiness really have to depend on maintaining that identity?” Because that’s originally why you created that identity to begin with. You developed those skills in search of happiness. And they do provide some measure of happiness, but that happiness has its limitations, for it’s based on skills that will have to deteriorate someday.

Learning how to identify with the equanimity helps you step back from those

identities, because it gives you something more solid on which to take your stance. But eventually you have to step back from the equanimity itself, because even it is fabricated. This is when the mind goes beyond equanimity to non-fashioning: not fashioning a sense of “I” or “mine” around even your highest attainments. And hopefully the practice you’ve had in learning how to cut through your old narratives can help you in this step as well.

When death comes, if you’ve had practice in learning how not to identify with the things you’re been identifying with up to now, it’s going to be a lot easier to let them go. Then you can learn to look at the situation where you are at that moment: “Where are the escape routes here?” As Ajaan MahaBoowa told the woman who was dying of cancer, when the time comes, have a very clear sense of your awareness as something separate from the pain. Now, you don’t want to wait to the last moment to develop that sense. Develop it as much as you can while you’re still strong, realizing that your awareness of the pain is one thing, the pain itself is something else.

One way of helping this along is, when you see a pain in the body, to remind yourself that there are body sensations and there are pain sensations, and the two are different sorts of things. Body sensations are things like earth, water, wind, and fire; in other words, your sense of solidity, liquidity, warmth, energy in the body. That’s one level of sensation. Then there’s the actual pain sensation, which is another level of sensation. They’re there together, but they’re separate. You can learn how to see them as separate. That’s when you can really observe the pain. The problem is that we tend to glom these things together. If you glom the pain with the warmth, it becomes hot. If you glom it with a sense of solidity, it becomes solid, heavy. And then it’s just like a big immovable lump. But if you see that solidity is one thing and the pain is something else, the pain just seems to flit around. Even if it’s strong, it’s very erratic, and not nearly as monolithic and scary as it originally seemed.

So even though the pain may be there, you realize that it’s not the same sort of thing you thought it was. You can see that it’s something separate. The two things are there in the same place, but they’re different things, on different levels. Then you can apply the same principle to your awareness of both of the pain and the body sensations. The awareness is right there too, but it’s separate. Then when the time comes, you can ask yourself, “Which is going to stop first, the pain or the awareness?” And there’ll be an awareness in there that doesn’t do anything and doesn’t die. You have to peel away different layers of mental activity around it, but there is something in there that doesn’t die. You can be confident of that. Confident enough to let go of everything else.

This is why the Buddha has us develop equanimity, patience, and acceptance. It’s not the case that mere acceptance is all you need to do, or all you can do. If

that were the case, there wouldn't be four noble truths with four different duties. There'd be only one: There's pain, suffering, stress, and your duty is to learn how to accept it. Once I heard someone say that the Buddha claimed to teach only one thing—pain and the ending of pain—meaning that in accepting the fact of pain, you're doing all you can to put an end to pain. But that doesn't really end the suffering. And that's not what the Buddha taught at all. He didn't claim to teach only one thing. He taught suffering and the end of suffering as two different things. There is a way out. There is an escape. Suffering does end. But you have to learn to accept where there is suffering and what's causing it; you have to learn and accept the things you can change, the things you can't. Then focus on what you can change to make your escape.

That's what equanimity is for: so that you can find the escape. The more solid your mind is, the more clearly the escape will appear. So when you run into areas where you're no longer in control, you no longer have the strength you used to have, look for where you still *do* have strengths. Make the most of them. Because it's in that fighting spirit, your unwillingness to admit total defeat: That's where freedom is found.

There is This

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There's a famous simile in the texts where a man is suffering from pain. He gets tied up in anxiety and misery around the pain. And the Buddha says it's like being shot with an arrow and then shooting yourself with a second arrow. The physical pain is the first arrow; the mental pain is the second one. And it's the mental one that's important. As the Buddha says, the enlightened person, the awakened person, may still get shot with those first arrows but doesn't shoot him or herself with the second.

The second arrows are important because they get shot right into the heart, into the mind. The first arrow can only go as far as the body. The arrows that go into the mind are the ones that really hurt. They are the subject of the four noble truths. That's the suffering in the first noble truth: the suffering that craving and ignorance shoot into the heart.

So our training is learning how not to shoot ourselves with that second arrow. Although it's always struck me that there's more than just one second arrow. Lots of arrows get shot into the mind. The question is: How do we learn not to do that?

The clue to the answer is given in another passage where the Buddha talks about a person who has gained very exalted states in meditation and responds by saying, "I am at peace. I am released." As the Buddha comments, the "I am" in those statements is what's causing the problem. It shows that this person still has some connection, still has some clinging. After all, craving combined with clinging is what causes the suffering. And the "I am" that you build around things is one of the four types of clinging: doctrine-of-self clinging—your idea of who you are. You impose that on all kinds of experiences. You like to impose it on the ones where things are pleasurable, but once you set up the mold of the "I am" and stick in a nice pleasurable feeling, that pleasurable feeling can change and be replaced by an unpleasant feeling. So there you are. You've still got that sentence "I am this," but suddenly the "this" is something unpleasant. You've got a pain in the mold that you had created to contain pleasure.

This is where the teaching on not-self comes in to help. Learn how to view things without creating that sense of self—because after all, that sense of self is something that we do. We make this sense of self. And it does have its functions. As the Buddha said, when you want to understand something, you have to see

both its allure and its drawbacks. You don't just watch it arising and passing away. You want to understand when it arises why you hold onto it? So if you want to understand why you make a sense of self, you have to look for its allure. And the allure here is that the sense of self is useful in a lot of contexts. When you're eating food, you know which mouth to put it in. You know how to plan for the future. You know how to anticipate future dangers: that if you don't practice now, you're going to have trouble down the line. In that way the sense of self is useful.

But as with any activity, you've got to see when it's skillful and when it's not. And particularly if you find yourself shooting your heart with arrows, you've got a problem. To indicate the solution, the Buddha compares the case of that meditator placing the words "I am this" around his meditative experiences, with someone else who simply says, "There is this." When there's the perception of the infinitude of space, he doesn't equate himself with the infinitude of space, doesn't create a sense of pride around it. He simply says, "There is this: infinite space. There is this: nothingness. There is this: neither perception nor non-perception," or whatever the state may be. That's one of the tools for getting around this habit of building a self all the time.

This is a theme that recurs many places in the Canon. The monk who's dwelling in emptiness and practicing concentration looks at the perception in his mind—it might be the perception of the breath or whatever—and notices that there are these disturbances here, but also that there is a lack of disturbance compared with other perceptions. For instance, if you're sitting here with a perception of all the people sitting around you, you start thinking about the stories of what this person said today, and what are you going to have to do with that person tomorrow. There's a lot of disturbance connected with the perception of "people." But if you can hold onto the perception simply of "breath," the "people" disturbances go away. And you notice that. There is a level of disturbance with the breath because you still have to maintain it, you still have to work with the breath. So you notice, "There is this." As for what's not here, you notice, "Okay, that's absent."

When you're working with the frames of reference, you want to build up to the ability to simply notice, "There is the body; there are feelings; there are mind states; there are mental qualities," without building a lot of stories around them. And you can work in that direction. You're sitting here; it's warm tonight. And you could be thinking about the fact that it's a lot warmer tonight than it was last night and what does that mean for tomorrow? How am I going to get through the night? How am I going to get through tomorrow? You may even think up some project that requires you to go down to the library, to find some air conditioning, and off your thoughts go in that direction. But then you realize

you can't do that, so you start suffering. You could simply say, however, "There is this," and then look at what you've got here.

There are aggregates, there are sense media, and the properties of the body: earth, water, wind, fire. Okay, we've got more fire tonight than normal. Is your body all fire? Well, no. It's got other elements as well. There's liquidity, there's the motion of the breath. And there are the solid parts. Things are feeling too warm. Is everything warm? No there's still some water in there; some sensations in the body are cooler than others. Where are those cool sensations? Which part of the body feels cooler than the others? Focus on that.

As you stay with that sense of coolness, notice: Can you spread it around? This way you learn how to make use of what's there. There is this, there is warmth, but there's also the "this" that's not so warm. Or you can forget about the issue of hot and cold all together, and focus on the breath: how is the breath moving? Is the breath moving in a healthy way? Is it obstructed? Is it unobstructed? You can look at that.

As long as you stay simply on the level of elements, you're not shooting yourself with those second arrows. You're simply staying on the level of, "There is this." You're not creating stories around it. More precisely, you see more clearly what is there when you say, "There is this." You begin to see that you've taken a few details from the present and were stitching them together in a story that was making you suffer. You can ask yourself, "Why should I do that?"

You've got the choice of what you're going to focus on, which give you a lot of freedom right there. And as you sense the "I" building up around planning for tomorrow, or thinking about what happened today, you can cut through it. There is the thought of "I," but is it helpful now? No. If you're not carrying around the assumption that you're something, if you're not objectifying yourself, things are a lot lighter. Stay on the level of, "There is this" and explore, "Well, what is the "this"? How many thises are in here right now? There are lots of thises. And you've got the choice of which this you're going to focus on.

So the sense of self you have: Learn how to use it appropriately. Realize that it's an optional storyline, an optional concept that's helpful in some circumstances and harmful in a lot of other ones. Practice looking at the "There is this," to see what's going on, to see what role your present intentions are playing in shaping what's going on. The storylines, the assumptions, all the other things you tend to cling to: What do you have to let go of in order to stop that suffering?

When you look at things on this level, simply arising and passing away without carrying the storylines around all the time, it's a lot easier to let go of the things that the storylines would require. If you don't have to identify something

as “me,” then you don’t have to worry about what’s going to happen to me tomorrow. If the thought of “me” and “I” tomorrow comes up, you realize that’s optional. It’s not built into the way things are.

This is one of the reasons why we get the mind concentrated because as the Buddha said, once the mind is concentrated, you can see the aggregates as they arise, as they’re originated by conditions. You can see events at the sense spheres. You can analyze your sense of the body into aggregates and properties. When the mind is still in the present, you can simply look at things as they present themselves to your awareness here in the present moment. You get to see what’s really there and what’s not. If you take it just on this level, you can see that what’s really there is not nearly as oppressive as the stories made it out to be. Even when there’s severe pain, it’s a lot easier to take when you’re taking it just as what’s right here right now. You’re not weighing yourself down with thoughts of how long you’ve been in pain and how much longer you are going to be in pain, or that it’s been caused by somebody else, why is that person causing it.... You simply look at, “Here is the pain, here is the sensation, what can be done about it? Where should I focus my attention so I don’t have to suffer?”

One thing you could do is watch the pain pass away, pass away, because from moment to moment, it just keeps passing away. It’s like the difference between riding in a car facing forward and riding the car facing backward. Facing forward, you seem to take on everything coming at you; you become weighed down by everything that’s coming in, coming in, coming in at you. But if you turn around and face the back of the car as you’re riding along, just see things passing away, passing away, passing away. The actual impact is the same, but your attitude has changed. You see things passing away; you’re not gathering them in.

Ajaan Lee gives the example of a person plowing a field. Stupid people try to take the dirt as it falls off the plow and stick it in a bag. Of course they’re going to get weighed down. But if you simply watch the dirt as it falls off, falls off, falls off, you’re not carrying anything around with you. You don’t get weighed down. You can complete the plowing.

So that’s the other thing to think about as you’re watching pain as, “There is this.” You want to say, “This is passing away.” You don’t have to collect the pains, or gather them up to store them anywhere. And if that’s the way you can see things, that first arrow is really not so painful at all.

Facing Your Responsibilities

October 1, 2008

One of the ironies of our culture is that people who meditate are accused of running away from their responsibilities, running away from life, running away from reality, running away from the world. Actually as you sit here, you're sitting and staring face-to-face with your responsibilities: your intentions from moment to moment. One of the lessons you learn as you meditate is how many defilements you have, how much suffering your intentions can cause. And the whole point of the meditation is to take responsibility for your intentions and learn how to shape them into something better, something more responsible, more harmless—to admit that not every thought that comes into your head is a good thought, and that you are responsible for creating a lot of suffering for yourself and sometimes for people around you as well.

The people out in the world are the ones who are running away from these issues. They get buried in issues of making money and raising a family. Some of that work is necessary but a lot of it is just busy work. As they get old and face death, they look back at their lives and say, "What was that all about? What do you have to show for having been a human being?"

As you meditate, you're making changes in the big issue in life, which is the mind, the activities of the mind. These issues are right here right now. There's nowhere else you're going to see them. People out in the world, for the most part, have trouble sitting still. If they're not busying themselves with something, they feel empty, at loose ends. There's something wrong if you can't just sit with your mind and be quiet.

As we sit here, we're trying to figure out what that "something wrong" is and also figuring what to do about it. The breath gives you a handle, gives you something to do in the present moment so that you can stay here and not feel at loose ends. In the beginning stages it's difficult to look your mind straight in the face, or to even figure out where you would look for it.

So the breath gives you something to do. You work with the breath. As long as you're with the breath, you know you're in the present moment. And after a while you begin to learn a very important lesson: that if you're going to watch the mind, you watch it in its actions. You watch it in the act of dealing with the breath, trying to stay with the breath and then wandering off, coming back, trying to stay with it again and suddenly losing all sense of where you are and

finding yourself someplace else.

That's the way it is in the beginning. But as you work with it, you begin to notice that you can observe things in the mind you wouldn't be able to observe any other way: how it changes its mind, how one intention can sneak up on you to sabotage a previous intention. If you're careful, you can see these things. If you're alert and mindful, you begin to notice the tricks the mind plays on itself.

As you get better and better at the meditation, you learn how to undo those tricks, work your way around them, find exactly what it is in the mind that wants to wander off anyhow. You start entering into a dialogue with all your different skillful and unskillful ideas, your skillful and unskillful intentions. And you start converting more and more of your mind to the skillful side. That right there is an important achievement. Bit by bit you begin to figure out all the different ins and outs of the mind. You develop a greater sense of unity, not only in getting the mind to stay with the breath in a state of good strong concentration, but also in getting more and more of your mind on the side of wanting to do this. That's what right effort is all about, learning how to generate desire to do what's skillful and to drop what's unskillful.

This way you cause less suffering for yourself, less suffering for others. And your life has a very clear sense of direction. There's so little in the world that you can really straighten out, but you can straighten out your own mind. When the mind is straightened out, then the effect that you have on the world is not colored by greed, anger, delusion, jealousy; all those other unskillful states that can come along in the wake even of your generally well-intentioned efforts. Because as long as the mind doesn't really know itself, unskillful states can sneak in in all kinds of disguises.

And the amazing thing is that, as you take time off to be by yourself, the world comes running after you. You see this in the lives of the famous ajaans. Once they've straightened out their own act, lots of other people want to be around them because those people sense the beneficial impact of a pure mind, a mind that has been straightened out, realizing that it's a rare thing in this world. It's one of the things we lack in our culture, which is probably why people don't understand meditators. The more we can straighten out our own minds, the more proof we have that meditation is a useful activity. It's the most important activity in life. Even if nobody else sees the benefits, we see the benefits within ourselves. We can face the end of life with no fear, because we've seen the true Dharma.

As the Buddha once said, that's one of the reasons why people fear death: They're very uncertain about what is the true Dharma. Is there a deathless, is there no deathless? Is death just annihilation? Once you've seen the true Dharma, you have no doubt about it. When there is no doubt about this issue, death

doesn't hold any fear.

So realize that as you're sitting here, you're not running away from anything. You've actually got yourself cornered. You've got to face your own mind. As someone once said, there is wisdom in this technique of no escape. Now that you're sitting here, you've got to face your mind: How are you going to train it, how are you going to make this not a miserable experience but actually a blissful, happy, meaningful experience? Those are the skills that most people in the world never develop. But they are among the most important skills that you can develop, because they make life a meaningful life with a direction. A life that, as they say, goes in a good way.

Xtreme Drama

October 16, 2008

One of the forest ajaans, talking about the early years of his practice, talked about how his mind would progress, progress, progress, then the whole thing would come crashing down, with nothing left. Then it would start progressing again, and it would crash again. He began to notice there was a cyclical pattern to the ups and downs. He learned to anticipate them—and in particular, the crashes. And the way he got around this was to decide not to pay any attention to this idea—he didn't care whether it was progressing or regressing, he was just going to stick with his practice. In his case it was repeating the word *buddho*.

In other words, he decided he wasn't going to buy in to the drama that had begun to infuse his practice. He had developed quite a narrative of how things would go up and then down. And because he had bought into the drama, that just reinforced the pattern. The way out was not to buy into it, to have a more sensible attitude toward the whole thing. Whatever ups or downs there may be, you don't have to take them all that seriously. You just stick with your practice. You have to find the middle way between the extremes that the dramatic side of our personality likes to read into things.

The Buddha had a similar problem. In his case, he started out with the extreme of sensual indulgence. Then in order to get away from what he saw as the problem of sensual indulgence, he went totally into self torture. He was an extremist. If it wasn't one extreme, it was going to be the other. Thinking that deals in large abstractions tends to push us to extremism. And the type of thinking that likes to deal in drama goes in the same way as well.

So there's an ordinariness to the practice that sometimes we resist. It's like the poets and artists of the 19th century who despised the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie were prudent and sensible, and the poets hated them. There was nothing dramatic in their lives. But living a dramatic life could be pretty miserable. It may make for great art, but it's a miserable life. I read a novel one time in which a guy had been put in prison for murder. He was reading letters from his wife who was going through psychiatric counseling, in which her grief counselor had taught her to go step by step through the stages of her grief. And you could tell from tone of the narrative that the novelist despised grief counseling. It didn't have the drama, didn't have the excitement or grandeur of someone who gets excited enough to go out and kill somebody and then has to suffer the consequences.

Again, that's the kind of mindset that deals in extremes. Would you like to be somebody who is constantly going through one extreme or the other? Part of the mind enjoys it. It makes life more interesting. But it doesn't really help in terms of finding a solid happiness. There's nothing dramatic about solid happiness. There's nothing dramatic about a sensible attitude that learns how to deal pragmatically with issues as they arise. The ????(4:43) refuses to be blinded by extremes. That's when you learn to get past the romanticism and the drama of the extremes. That's when you really get on the path, and your practice really matures.

If you have a tendency to extremes—we usually don't have just one extreme in our practice, we go from one extreme to the opposite extreme, back-and-forth—you've got to find ways of modulating that. This means modulating both your physical experience of extremes, and your mental attitude toward them.

I once had a student who was manic-depressive. She found that a large part of the problem was anticipating her ups and downs. The anticipation in and of itself would exacerbate the extremes. But she also found that in her extreme moods, the experience of the body was very different. This is where the breath became helpful. When she was feeling down, she could breathe in a way that would add more breath energy, make the body lighter, lighter, lighter, so she didn't feel so weighed down all the time. And without the physical experience of being weighed down, her depressive mind states didn't have so much to latch onto. This began to cut through the pattern. Similarly, when she found she was getting more manic, she could breathe in a way that made the body heavier. She would think a lot about the earth element, find whatever sensations in the body were solid, still, heavy, and substantial, and just focus on those sensations. That would balance things out. It would balance out the energy both in body and mind. So gradually the wild mood swings became a thing of the past. And her life wasn't as dramatic as it was before, but it was a more reasonable life, a more manageable life.

That's the physical side. There is also extremism in our thoughts. If it's not total sensual indulgence, it's total abstinence. When the mind looks at abstinence as wrong, so it goes running to the indulgence without really realizing that there is a middle way. There are sensual pleasures that are innocent, that are harmless. Mahakassapa, who was one of the strictest of the Buddha's monks, has verses talking about the beauties of nature, how much he enjoys getting out into the wilds. Apparently this is the first wilderness poetry in the world. And so even the strictest arahants have room in their practice for pleasures that are innocent. As he said, being in the forest refreshed him. And the mind does need refreshing. You've got to find ways of dealing with its moods without giving in to them, and realize that you don't have to think in extremes. There are ways of enjoying some

of the pleasures of the senses, because they gladden the mind.

That's one of the duties we have in the meditation. Look at the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation. When you find that the mind is getting down, its energy is low, you figure out ways of gladdening it. Part of that can mean learning how to think about the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha in ways that you find inspiring—anything that gives enjoyment to the practice, that doesn't get you all tied up. It's not that sensual pleasures are bad. The beautiful things, the nice things in the world are not the problem. The problem comes from these obsessive plans we build around them: "This is going to be really great, this is going to be really good, this is going to be worth whatever effort goes into it. Whatever harm it may cause on the side, who cares? This is what I want." That's the problem, a very unrealistic attitude toward what sensual pleasure will do for us. That, you've got to watch out for.

But the pleasure that comes from a harmless activity—any activity in which you're actually doing good for yourself and other people—is perfectly okay. It's not that the breath is the only way of finding pleasure in the practice. There's a pleasure in generosity. There's a pleasure in being virtuous. There's pleasure in finding time alone with nature. All these are perfectly legitimate ways of looking for happiness, legitimate ways of gladdening the mind.

The same with steadying the mind. If you find that your thinking is running away with you, you've got to figure out ways of just settling down and being really, really still, so that the extremes of your thinking don't pull you away from your center. It can happen that your thinking begins to follow from an innocent conclusion to the next conclusion, and to the next conclusion, and then runs away with you. This is a problem with being logical without being reasonable: It can totally pull you away from the practice.

In Thailand, they have a term, "Thinking a lot," and it's not a good thing. It means your thinking is taking over. The logic is there but without the reason. Reason is when you think about things with a sense of balance, a sense of proportion.

So if you find your thinking running away, what ways do you have of getting your awareness to be still, settled down, solid, solid, solid? Think of the Buddha's meditation on the elements: making the mind like earth; making it like water, undisturbed by whatever it washes; wind, undisturbed by whatever it blows away; fire, undisturbed by whatever it burns. And you've got those qualities in your body. So whichever quality seems the best to make you feel solid and grounded—it's most often earth, but not necessarily—work on that quality.

This takes a lot of the drama out of life, but it's a much more sensible, reasonable, happier way of living. The Buddha was nothing if not sensible. He

had explored all the extremes and he realized that there was nothing there. And his life story makes for great drama, the first part at least. After he became the Buddha there wasn't as much drama, at least there was no emotional drama for him, but it was a much happier life.

There was once a cartoon in the New Yorker with a man sitting in his living room, meditating. His wife was off in another room, looking in the door at him together with a friend, and complaining to her friend: She said, "George used to be such an interesting neurotic before he learned meditation." It's one thing to be interesting, another thing to be happy and wise. So watch out for the extremes and the type of thinking that indulges in extremes, for it will drive you off the path.

This is why the Buddha has that phrase: having respect for concentration. The concentrated mind is solid, still, stable, extremely undramatic, but with a very strong sense of well-being. That's why it was the first factor of the path the Buddha latched onto after he had explored all the various extremes. Here is a form of pleasure that's harmless, and you can then use that as your test case. Any pleasure that doesn't pull you away from this, that doesn't make it difficult for the mind to settle down, can be something to energize you on the path. Any form of thinking that doesn't pull you away from this, helps you to settle down, can be part of the path. And you find that that kind of thinking makes a lot more subtle distinctions, doesn't go running off after extremes.

There are some teachers who criticize idealism, but it's not the idealism that's bad. It's the extremism, the absolutism: that's the problem. There are a lot of ideals that are really, really worth exploring, really worth following. Ajaan Mun in his last sermon mentioned the determination not to come back ever again to be the laughingstock of the defilements. Hold on to that determination, he said. Never let it go. And the determination requires, one, that you believe it is humanly possible. Convince yourself that it's possible to follow this path to get results. Hold onto that. That's an ideal you never want to abandon. And two, convince yourself that it's not only humanly possible, it's possible for you and you are going to do it. You stick with that ideal. If you find any extreme forms of thinking getting in the way of that, those are the things you've got to drop. Focus on what helps to get you to understand better and better exactly what are these defilements that are laughing at you. They pull you off into the extremes, and they laugh at you for being so gullible. You run back to the other extreme, and they laugh at you again.

It's when you're on the path that they can't see you. As the Buddha said, this is the path where Mara can't detect you, Mara can't see you. You're invisible. This requires a lot of skill, but it's an interesting skill to develop. It may not be dramatic, but there comes a strong sense of well-being and accomplishment

when you've mastered it. That's what you're looking for.

In Charge of Your World

October 19, 2008

There's a story in the Canon, where King Pasenadi comes to see the Buddha in the middle of the day. And the Buddha asks him, where are you coming from in the middle of the day? The King says, "Oh, I've been meeting with my ministers and talking about the sorts of things that people obsessed with their power talk about:—which is a remarkably frank statement. You can imagine a press conference where a President is asked, "What have you been doing today?" and he says, "Talking about the things that people obsessed with power talk about."

The Buddha asks the King, "Suppose someone were to come from the East saying, 'This enormous mountain is moving in from the East crushing all living beings in its path.' Another person comes from the South saying, 'There's another mountain coming from the South crushing all living beings in its path.' Another person comes from the West, a person comes from the North. 'There is a mountain moving in from the West and another mountain moving down from the North,' all four mountains crushing all living beings in their path.

The Buddha then asks him, "Given this great destruction of human life, and remembering about how rare it is to gain a human birth, what would you do?" And the King says, "Well, what else could I do but practice the Dharma, train the mind, and do good?" And the Buddha says, "I announce to you, great king: Death is moving in, crushing all living beings in its path. So what are you going to do?" And the King says, "Well, what else can you do but practice the Dharma?"

We look at the situation in the world right now and there's a lot to be worried about. But we can be confident about one thing, that the best way to respond to whatever the situation is in the world is to practice the Dharma, to be generous, to be virtuous and to meditate to train the mind. Because whether the situation in the world is good or bad, there is always aging, illness and death. There is no point where the world is so totally free of insecurity that you can really trust that the situation is going to be good. Even if the economy is great and everybody agrees to lay down their arms, people are still going to get sick, still going to get old, and still going to die.

But the empowering thing in all this is that your actions do shape the world you experience: the world you've experienced, the world that you're experiencing now, and on into the future. So no matter what anybody else does, you always

want to practice the Dharma—to hold by your ideals, to hold by your principles—because you create your world through your actions, and you want that world to be a principled one.

One of the misunderstandings we pick up from the media is that the important decisions in our world are made by other people over whom we have no control. But it's a fact that even though we're sitting here in the same room, each of us lives in a different world. And the world of our experience is created by our own actions. We're the ones who are creating it, and we continue to create it with our actions each moment.

So basically you're in charge of your world. You're not a monad totally independent from influences from outside, but the choices you make are the ones that shape your life. If you make wise choices, generous choices, you protect yourself and you protect other people. On the surface it may sound selfish. Here you are trying to make sure your little world is okay, but the only way you can make sure your little world is okay is to act in a way that you're not harming anybody else. And influences spread around. If you act in a noble way even in the midst of danger and destruction, that's a good example to other people. Other people want to join in.

Being a human being is not really worth much if it's all just scrambling after wealth, scrambling after things that other people have to be deprived of. The Buddha saw this prior to going out practicing. He said the world was like a puddle that was drying up, and there are all these fish in the puddle fighting for that little last bit of water. He found it really dismaying. That kind of life is not a human life, it's an animal life. Human life is one in which, regardless of what the situation is outside, you know you shape your world through your actions, and that the actions shaping a good world are ones that are honorable, compassionate, wise. And you can hold to that principle.

Some people were commenting this evening that the crowd here today was one of the gentlest crowds they had ever seen. That's because we came together to do good, to be generous, and to rejoice in one another's generosity. This is something that's been typical of the Buddhist tradition ever since the very beginning. Back in the 19th century when Westerners were beginning to read some of the Buddhist texts, and all saw was suffering, death, aging, illness, As a result, they wrote Buddhism off as a very pessimistic religion. But when they went to Asia, they saw that Buddhists in general were very happy people. The temple fairs, the various observances in the course of the year, were always very happy gatherings. And the Westerners came to the conclusion that Buddhists didn't understand their own religion. If they really understood what the Buddha taught, they would be morose and horribly depressed. But instead they were happy.

So Westerners came up with a theory of what they called the great tradition versus the little tradition, i.e. the great tradition being what was in the texts and the little tradition being Buddhism on the ground. But what they really missed was the central message in the texts, which is that your happiness is in your hands. And that true happiness comes from behaving in a way that's totally harmless. And not just harmless in the sense that you're not going to hurt other people, but also that you're going to positively do good by practicing generosity as an important part of the path. This is how the Buddha's message is empowering. You can create a happy life by acting in ways that are noble and good.

You see this in the Buddhist tradition all the way from the time of the Buddha's funeral. Even though the Buddha had just passed away, there was singing and dancing at his funeral in honor of him. On the one hand, people were sad that he had gone, but on the other, they were honoring the fact that they had been alive when there had been such a wonderful human being in the world. The same with the temple fairs in the very early centuries: They were very happy occasions because everyone got together to do good. Social caste didn't mean anything. Everybody was working together, helping in line with their talents and abilities.

So it is possible to create a good society. Whenever one gathers around the principle that true happiness comes from being harmless, being helpful, training the mind—that's empowering. And you don't need to have political power in the world outside. You have the power to create your own world right here, right now through your actions.

One thing that would frequently strike me when I was in Thailand was that I'd be on my alms round, walking past a little tiny grass shack, just big enough for two people to sleep in. And sure enough there were two people in the grass shack, a newlywed couple, still very poor. One of them would run out of the house and want to put something in my bowl. When you're the beneficiary of the generosity of poor people, it really goes to the heart. I'd come back from my alms round and tell myself, "You can't be lazy today. A poor person has been generous with you."

The Buddha's teaching gives that opportunity to be generous, to be virtuous, to everybody, regardless of their position on the world. Regardless of how rich or poor you may be, no matter what society may think of you, you have the ability to train your mind. And you can shape your world through that power. The teachings talk about becoming: It's basically your sense of the world in which you live, and your identity within that world. That becoming is based on your actions. Your actions are the field in which a particular sense of the world can grow. You keep on doing things that you know are good, and that creates a good

field. The possibilities in that field are always replenished. That's something totally within your power. The world at large may have political strife, economic collapse—all kinds of negative things may be happening but in your world—but you're creating a good world. And you're not the only one benefiting from that.

So this is why we train the mind. Regardless of the situation outside, it's through training the mind that we're shaping the world—the world in which we live and the world in which the people around us live as well. So even though the mountains of aging, illness, and death may be moving in, we can still train the mind. Because as the Buddha pointed out, death is not the end. It's one incident in a very long story. Poverty is not the end. Famine, the four horsemen, are not really the end. The four horsemen have been stampeding all over the world for who knows how long. But we can still do good.

And in doing good, we protect ourselves. As the Mangala Sutta points out, your protection lies in the good you do. There was another time when King Pasenadi went to see the Buddha. He had commented that the more he thought about it, the more he realized that people who act in harmful ways in what they do, in what they say, in what they think don't really protect themselves. They don't really love themselves. They leave themselves open to attack from all sides. The people who are well protected are the ones who behave well in thought and word and deed. With that kind of protection, you don't need an army. Or as the Buddha said in the *Dhammapada*, if your hand doesn't have a wound, then you can pick up poison and not get harmed by it because you haven't done the sort of thing that would leave an opening for the poison to seep into.

In the same way, when you train your mind, you're giving protection to others and to yourself as well. This is how we can live together in peace and harmony. So on a day like this when people have come together to do good, it's something we should rejoice in. Because that rejoicing helps to remind us where true happiness lies.

Giving Meaning to Life

November 7, 2008

There are passages in the texts where the Buddha gives a pretty bleak picture of life and the world at large. Like that chant just now: “The world just passes away. There is no one in charge. It’s a slave to craving.” In other words, there is no grand design to give meaning to life or the world. Things are simply driven by blind craving. There is another passage where the Buddha talks about the way beings wander on in this world. It’s like throwing a stick up into the air. Sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on that end, sometimes it lands splat in the middle. No real pattern. No real direction. This doesn’t mean that life is hopeless. But it means simply that life doesn’t have a meaning unless you give it a meaning. So that’s the real question. It’s not what is the meaning of life, the question is: What kind of meaning do you want to give to it?

This is where the practice comes in, because the practice gives direction. You want to understand the mind so you can understand why it is that even though everything we do is aimed at producing happiness, we often end up causing suffering, pain, and disappointment instead. Why is that? And as the Buddha pointed out, it’s within our power to learn, to understand why. That quest to learn and to understand is what gives meaning to life, gives direction to life in a way that nothing else can.

You look at the things that people try to accomplish in life, in the world outside. The world seems designed to just grind everything down. You want this kind of relationship, but the relationship just falls apart. You want to develop a nice strong body, well, it gets strong for a while, then it starts getting sick, then it gets old, and you’re left with nothing. You want to accomplish something large in the world, but then the economy collapses. War comes. Famine comes. All kinds of things can happen. So looking to the world for meaning is a frustrating, very frustrating experience.

But when you look inside for meaning, you find that there is a lot to learn, there is a lot to understand. Things do get accomplished. As you work on the path, you begin to see how the mind creates a thought world and you realize that you have the choice to go into that thought world or not. As you develop more and more mindfulness, more and more alertness, you understand these processes of the mind. Through understanding them, you can free yourself from them. You don’t have to be their slave. The world that’s a slave to craving: You don’t have to get into that world.

As the Buddha said, the process of learning about these things is not accompanied by disappointment and sorrow. It's accompanied by joy, a sense of release that comes when you realize that you've been doing something really stupid for a long, long time, and now you've seen through it. You've understood it. You've gone beyond it. You really can cut through and free yourself from the defilements of the mind. When the path comes together in the mind, you see on the one hand that there is such a thing as the Deathless, and on the other hand that you've attained it through mastering your own intentions, understanding the process of the mind. There is more to experience than simply the conditioned and fabricated things we normally experience. That right there cuts through a lot of fetters.

It's like cutting off your arm, which may not be a pretty idea, but once the arm is cut off, it's off. And even though the doctors may try to sew it back on, it's never quite the same. There is such a thing as a permanent change. And even without getting to the noble attainments, you find that having more mastery and more understanding over the processes of the mind puts you in a much better position. You understand yourself better. You cause less suffering for yourself. You understand other people better, and cause them less suffering as well.

So this is a project that's really worth giving your life to. And it gives meaning to your life. It gives a direction to your life. You develop a new relationship to yourself. Ultimately you get to the point where you don't need a sense of identity. But in the meantime you develop a skillful sense. There is a sense of self-esteem that comes with knowing that you can learn. No matter how old you are, no matter how little or how much time is left to your life, you can still learn.

The issue came up a while back: People who are really driven to accomplish things, really driven to develop a sense of self around their accomplishments, are noticing that that causes a lot of stress, a lot of pain and anxiety. But the answer is not to have no accomplishments, or to have no desire for accomplishments. The answer lies, first, in really getting a strong sense of what is a genuine accomplishment in life, and second, gaining a skillful sense of yourself around the process of trying to attain that accomplishment.

What this comes down to is two things: The first is having a willingness to learn. If that's where your sense of identity, your self-esteem is focused, it's skillful. The gain the ability to look at something you've done and realize that there may be something wrong here, but that doesn't have to threaten your identity. It just calls forth your desire to learn more about what did you do wrong, why was it wrong, what could you do in the future not to repeat that mistake. A second aspect of this more skillful sense of self is a sense of self that understands what's an important question: what's an issue that's worth pursuing

and what are the issues you don't really have to pursue.

Here again, the practice gives you a good strong direction. Any issue related to why there is suffering and what you can do to put an end to it: That's an important issue. You hear about people who are suddenly told by their doctors they have, say, three months or three weeks to live, and they suddenly develop a very strong sense of what they really want out of the remainder of their life. They clear away all the distractions and focus on what's really important. And it's good that they do that, but it's sad that they had to wait for a death sentence before they do. We have to remember we are all here with a death sentence. It's simply that we don't have the days marked out for us, how much longer it's going to be. But we do know that we have a limited amount of time, yet we tend to forget that. We act as if we didn't know.

So keep that in mind. Death is down the line. Maybe even before death, illness will come and make it more and more difficult to practice. So the question is: What are the really important things you want to take care of while you've still got the chance? This is the big issue: looking at your own actions to see where they cause suffering and stress, and to figure out how you can act in a way that doesn't. And the skills you learn in the process of focusing on that important issue will serve you in good stead all the way through aging, all the way through illness, and all the way through death. The ability to keep your mind focused on what's important and to put aside unimportant things, the willingness to learn all the time--those abilities will always serve you in good stead.

So this is how we give meaning to life: finding an issue that gives direction and focuses on the really important problems in life, that has the potential to take us to someplace where real changes can be made, changes that make a true difference. It's one of the reasons why Dharma practice is something you really can give your life to, because it gives meaning back to your life.

The Brahmaviharas on the Path

November 13, 2008

The Buddha often used images of gradual practice, a gradual change to illustrate the path of practice. There's one passage where he says it's like a stairway. You go from one step to the next, to the next, without jumping up a whole set of stairs. There's another passage where he talks about the floor of the ocean gradually getting deeper and deeper, till it finally hits a precipice.

In other passages, he talks about developing virtue and then, once you've got your virtue, you develop mindfulness and contentment; and from mindfulness and contentment, you work on the hindrances, develop concentration, and finally develop discernment—which makes it sound like you have to perfect one step before you can get to the next.

But you have to remember that the point in the practice where virtue is perfected is when all eight factors of the noble path come together. One of the results of the first stage of awakening is that you've completed all the work you have to do in terms of virtue, but you still have work to do in terms of concentration and discernment.

That doesn't mean, however, you didn't work on concentration and discernment to get there. You needed them both. After all, they're there in the path, which means you can't wait until your virtue is perfect before you work on meditation. All three parts of the training help one another along.

So you don't have to wait until your virtue is perfect, or you've got loads and loads of merit, before you start meditating. You start it right now. And you'll notice as you work on the meditation that the more virtuous you are—the more you can exercise restraint in the course of the day, the more you can be generous and develop other good qualities throughout the day—the easier it will be to meditate. The fact that you're meditating, strengthening your mindfulness and concentration, makes it easier to develop those good qualities throughout the day. It's like washing your hands: Your left hand washes your right hand, and your right hand washes your left hand. That way they both get clean.

So as you're sitting here, don't worry about how much you have or haven't completed the other factors of the path. Focus on the ones you're working on right now. At the same time, when you're going through the rest of the day when you're not sitting with your eyes closed, when you're engaged with other activities, don't worry about sitting with your eyes closed. Just keep asking

yourself, “What’s the skillful thing to do now?” Try to bring some sense of ease with the breath into all your other activities. It’ll make it easier to do the skillful thing and step back from unskillful mind states that pop up, where you get upset, where you get flustered, angry, whatever. You’ll develop more resistance to those mind states.

It’s in this way that all the elements of the practice help one another along, and the whole day can be devoted to the practice of developing the mind.

There’s a passage where the Buddha says that a stingy person cannot attain the noble attainments, can’t even attain jhana. But he also says that the quality of your generosity will grow as your meditation advances. In other words, generosity helps your meditation, your meditation makes it easier to be generous in ways that grow more and more large hearted. This is particularly true when you’re working on developing the brahmaviharas.

Ajaan Lee describes that the brahmaviharas as food for your precepts. And that’s how the Buddha presents them as well. There’s a passage where he talks about reflecting on the fact that you’ve made mistakes in the past. You’ve broken the precepts, harmed other people. The proper attitude to have toward that, he says, is to realize that you can’t go back and undo the mistake, and sitting there stewing about it is not going to help, either. So you resolve that you’re not going to repeat the mistake. You’re going to exercise restraint in the future.

Then, to strengthen that resolve, you develop the brahmaviharas: unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. This helps to ensure that you’re going to stick with that resolve to exercise restraint, because if you really feel goodwill for other people, you’re not going to harm them. If you feel goodwill for them, then when you see them suffering, you want to help. That’s compassion. If you see that they’re already happy, you want them to continue being happy. That’s empathetic joy. If you realize that there’s nothing you can do to help them or the situation that you yourself are encountering, then the kindest thing is to develop equanimity toward the things you can’t change, which frees you to focus on the things you can. So goodwill underlies all four of the brahmaviharas. It’s the essential one. It helps you maintain your precepts. It helps develop concentration.

The Buddha also talks about the levels of jhana you can attain by developing goodwill and the other brahmaviharas. And if you do it right, it’s also an exercise in discernment. You can’t just sit there beaming out nice thoughts and think that that’s going to take care of the problem. If, when you get up from meditation, you see that somebody has done something outrageous, then if you haven’t really thought the matter through your immediate reaction will be to get upset again.

Here it’s important to understand that goodwill doesn’t mean that you’re

going to like people. You simply don't want them to meet with harm. You want them to meet with true happiness. You've got to learn how to develop that attitude in a proper way. That means both understanding the principle of karma, and also understanding how you fabricate feelings in the mind so that they really are genuine. This is where the brahmavihara practice leads to discernment.

Part of the discernment also lies in the exercise of equanimity, realizing when it's appropriate to develop equanimity as an act of kindness to yourself and to others as opposed to when you focus more directly on the other brahmaviharas. But you also have to understand what it means to wish for people to be happy. You want them to do things that lead to happiness. It's not like you're pretending you can take a magic wand and wave it over their heads and they'll immediately be happy. That's not how it works. The principle of karma says that if you're going to be happy, you have to do things that are skillful. So if you want to imagine people being happy, you have to imagine them doing skillful things, being generous, being happy in being generous, being happy in exercising restraint. And if it's not too much of a stretch, think of them being happy meditating.

In the *Metta Sutta* in the *Sutta Nipata*, where the Buddha talks about how to express a thought of goodwill, he doesn't simply say, "May all beings be happy." That's part of what he has to say, but not all. He goes through all the various categories of beings: long, middling and short; seen, unseen; big and small. But he also says, "May all beings not despise anyone." In other words, may they not create the causes for unskillful actions. So you have to think about cause and effect, and realize that if the people you don't like could actually understand the causes for happiness, the world would be a much better place. This is why you can't have your likes get in the way of universal goodwill. Goodwill is one thing. Liking and disliking other people: that's something else. We're not pretending that everybody is okay, or that everybody is nice. We simply realize the world would be a much better place if everybody understood the causes of happiness and would act on them. That's something you can wish without feeling hypocritical. It's not make-believe.

So that's one area in which you start developing right view in the process of developing goodwill. Then you take it further, by learning how to develop a feeling of goodwill that you really feel down into your bones. How are you going to do that? You can't simply repeat goodwill phrases. There's more to a genuine feeling than that. As the Buddha said, you fabricate your emotions through three kinds of fabrication: physical, verbal, and mental. The breath counts as physical fabrication. Directed thought and evaluation count as verbal fabrication. And feelings and perceptions count as mental fabrication. The breath is what actually takes an emotion and makes it real in the body. So a good way to start with the

brahmaviharas is to learn how to breathe in a way that feels really good. You have to develop some sense of wellbeing within yourself before you can wish it for other people.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a water tank. If there's no water in the tank, then when you open the faucet, all that comes out is air. In other words, you have to have the water of well-being inside before you can offer real water to other people. So you work on breathing in a way that feels really good, and use your directed thought and evaluation, the verbal fabrication, to help with that. But that can help with other issues as well. You can start thinking about how, if there are people out there who you really have trouble feeling goodwill for, it's in your best interest to develop goodwill for them.

One of the images the Buddha gives is of a person walking across a desert, hot and trembling with thirst, coming across a little tiny puddle of water in a cow's footprint. He realizes that if he's going to drink the water, he'll have to get down on his hands and feet and slurp it up. If he tries to scoop it up with his hand, it's going to get muddy. So he very carefully puts his mouth down on the ground and slurps up that little bit of water.

This image describe you when you're angry. Notice your position. You're hot and trembling with thirst; you can't afford to focus on the bad points of other people because that's going to get you even hotter and thirstier. Your goodness is going to burn away. You look at the human race, and don't see that there's anything good out there, there's no reason to treat people kindly, because they're all selfish or whatever. If that's your thinking then you're going to make it harder and harder to develop your own goodness. So your goodness requires that you think about the goodness of other people, no matter how little it may be. It's not that you're pretending that they have a lot of goodness, but you have to focus on it realizing that there is some goodness in these people. You don't have to wait for everybody to have Buddha Nature before they're good enough for you to treat well. Just a little bit of goodness is enough to nourish your own goodness. Because it's not a question of their deserving your goodwill. You need to develop goodwill for your own well-being.

So when you think in these ways, holding these perceptions in mind, you can develop a more and more genuine feeling of goodwill, a feeling that's not threatened by the fact that other people are going to continue to act in sometimes really outrageous and horrible ways. Because when you see them acting in horrible ways, you've got to have compassion for them. They are creating causes for suffering.

As you develop these thoughts of goodwill, you're giving yourself a stronger foundation for your own virtue, creating a stronger foundation for concentration, and gaining some practice in understanding this process of

fabrication, which is what discernment is all about: to see how states of mind are fabricated, how emotions are fabricated both in body and mind, and to get more and more sensitive to how this process takes place.

So it's not the case that you work on virtue and then, when it's all taken care of, you move on to concentration. Or that when that's all taken care of, you move on to discernment. You have to work on developing the mind in such a way that all three parts of the training work together, help one another along. So even though the process is gradual, it's gradual in a sense that all three develop together.

Keep this point in mind. As you sit down to meditate, working on developing your concentration, it's not only concentration that's going to get developed. If you learn how to carry the concentration into your daily life, you're going to gain help with your virtue, looking after the precepts and helping with your discernment.

So learn not to compartmentalize the practice. Remember it's all of a piece and that all the different facets of the practice help one another along.

Goodwill First & Last

November 20, 2008

It's traditional to begin and end each session of meditation with thoughts of goodwill for all beings without exception. The purpose in each case is different. In the beginning, you start the meditation with thoughts of goodwill as a way of putting the mind in the right frame, in the right context to meditate. You want to pull yourself out of your own little personal narrative, the events of the day, and take a larger view before you settle down and look at the present moment. If you don't, it's very likely that you'll take your narrative into the present moment with you. If it's an unpleasant narrative, it makes the present moment unpleasant as well. If it's been a bad day and you sit down and try to get the mind into the present moment to stay with the breath and you find it doesn't stay with the breath: If you've been down on yourself in the course of the day, you get down on yourself even more. You're a miserable meditator. You can't do it. See? you keep wandering off the breath. More proof that you're miserable.

So a good way to break that connection is to start thinking a few thoughts of infinity, of all beings everywhere without exception. Like that character in *Through the Looking Glass* who says he likes to think of two or three impossible things every morning before breakfast: Think about infinity a couple of times a day. It changes your perspective. And you're actually following the pattern of the Buddha on the night of his awakening. The three knowledges that he gained, part of full awakening, follow this pattern as well.

The first knowledge was recollection of his past lives, all his narratives going back many eons. And notice: He didn't go from that knowledge straight to the present moment. The second knowledge had to do with all living beings. He'd seen in his first knowledge that he had gone through many lifetimes, in many different roles, many different levels of being. But that knowledge left some questions unanswered. Was he the only one who had those many levels of being? And why were there so many? Why were they so varied?

So in the second watch of the night, he inclined his mind to the knowledge of the passing away and re-arising of all beings everywhere. And he saw that everybody goes through this process of death and rebirth. Everybody changes roles, changes levels. If you look simply at the individual narrative, these changes seem to follow a very erratic course, up and down. The Buddha himself said that it was like throwing a stick up in the air: Sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on that end, sometimes it lands splat in the middle. But it

doesn't seem to have much rhyme or reason.

But as he saw things in the larger context, he began to see there was a pattern. People took rebirth in line with their karma, in line with their actions. And their actions were based on their views. People who had acted on wrong views, had no respect for the noble ones, tended to go to bad destinations. People who had acted on right views, who had respect for the noble ones, went to good destinations. So there was a pattern. The pattern was determined by view and intention.

And it was only after seeing the larger pattern that he was ready to focus on the present moment with in the proper terms—events in the mind viewed as causes and effects—and with the proper question: How do view and intention operate in the present moment? Is there some way that this knowledge can be used to put an end to suffering? In the third watch of the night, that's what he found. Looking at intentions as skillful and unskillful, looking at views as right and wrong, and applying those perspectives to the question of suffering, he discovered the four noble truths. He applied them, followed the tasks appropriate to them, and gained awakening.

So notice the pattern. It starts with his own narratives, moves to the larger picture, and then focuses in on the present moment. This is what we have to do as we settle down to meditate. You remind yourself that you're here for the sake of goodwill, for the sake of true happiness. And you realize you're not the only one out there who has to train his or her mind. Everybody has to train the mind. It's not an easy process for anybody. Some people may find it easier than others, but that's because they did the work in the past.

So taking this larger view reminds you of your intention for being here and it also reminds you that when things aren't going well in the meditation, you're not the only one for whom they are not going well. I've been counseling some people in a Dharma study program. And their experience with retreats up to this point had been that you go in, you don't talk to anybody, and you go home. So as you're sitting there in the retreat hall meditating, everybody else looks so calm and still, and yet you're fighting with your hindrances, with your defilements. You seem to be the only person who is suffering that way.

But when these people come on a study retreat, they get a chance to talk with one another and they discover that everybody goes through the same thing. Everybody has the same problems. And instead of being discouraging, it's actually encouraging. You realize that even though things may take a lot longer than you had hoped, the fact that they take long doesn't mean it's hopeless. It's the common pattern throughout the world. When you see the larger pattern and understand it, you're in a much better position to focus on the present moment with the right attitude, with the right sense of balance.

So spreading thoughts of unlimited goodwill help in this direction is a way of preparing you to settle down with the breath. Then actually being with the breath is a very good way of showing goodwill for yourself right now. There's enough suffering in life. You don't have to compound it by breathing in a way that's harsh, uncomfortable, or unhealthy. So you look at the breath and see how it's affecting the body in different parts: where the breath energy seems comfortable, where it seems strained, what you can do to make it comfortable throughout, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out, and all the way through all the different parts of the body. You start seeing which part of the breath cycle you push too much: Are you squeezing out breath energy too much as you breathe out? Are you making the breath too long as you breathe in? Notice how you relate to the different parts of the cycle.

Notice also how you relate to the different parts of the body as you breathe in, the different levels of breath energy in the body, because the breath enters the body at different rates. There's the breath coming in and out of the lungs, which takes a while it to fill the lungs. But there's also the energy that flows in the nerves, which goes a lot faster. In fact, as soon as you've started to breathe in, before you even notice it, the breath has already gone through all your nerves—unless there's a blockage someplace. Some people say as they breathe in and try to get the breath to go to the different parts the body, they can't get it all the way down the body, say all the way down the legs by the time the lungs are full. That's because they're trying to force a harsh breath or a heavy breath down the legs, which is not actually good for the legs. Think of the breath in the nerves and the blood vessels as a lot subtler, a lot lighter, a lot faster. See how that works. You have to do a lot of experimenting because each of us relates to the breath in different ways, relates to the energy in the body in different ways. And so each of us has different habits we have to learn how to correct.

This is one of the reasons in the forest tradition the ajaans are sometimes seemingly so harsh with their students as the students are not observant about the little things going on in daily life. And the reason for this is that the ajaans want to make the point that you have to be very, very observant. If you can't observe the little things in daily life, you won't be able to observe the even littler things in the course of your meditation.

So that's what we're doing here in the present moment: exploring how the breath in the body feels right here in this world of the body right here, without reference to the world outside. Just this world of energy. The more you can get into it, the more you can get yourself immersed in it, the more you begin to notice the subtleties of the energy, the better. The body feels better. The mind gets more and more concentrated, feels less and less frazzled.

Which puts you in a good position at the end of the meditation to spread

thoughts of goodwill again. This serves two purposes. One, it reminds you, when you leave the meditation, how you want to relate to other people. You want to relate in a way that's conducive both to your happiness and to theirs.

Two, the force of a concentrated mind can actually make that wish for goodwill more effective. I know many stories of people who've sensed when somebody's been meditating and spreading thoughts of goodwill to them specifically, and they realize it, they sense it. The power of a concentrated mind gives a lot more energy to the thoughts that you focus on as you are leaving meditation. So you want them to be thoughts of goodwill. They're good for you. They're good for the world.

So when you spread thoughts of goodwill at the beginning of the meditation, it's primarily for your own sake; when you spread them at the end of the meditation, it's primarily for the sake of others. But notice that "primarily": It's not exclusively just for you or just for them. When you show goodwill to others, you're helping yourself. And when you help yourself in the right way, you're helping others as well.

Try to make this a regular part of your meditation: at the beginning, thoughts of goodwill for everyone, everywhere; and as you leave the meditation, again, thoughts of goodwill for everyone, everywhere. This creates the right framework, the right context for the meditation. It keeps you on track. You find that good breathing helps with goodwill and goodwill helps with good breathing. This is a common pattern throughout the Buddha's teachings. It is possible to find a happiness that's good for you and good for others—the kind of happiness where everybody benefits. Internally this means both body and mind. Externally it means both you and everybody around you. That's the kind of happiness we're working toward.

A Stranger to Your Thoughts

November 21, 2008

As we're meditating, we're working toward two things: One is stillness and the other one is discernment. They go together. They are not two radically different processes. Because after all, to get the mind to settle down and be still, you have to discern what's going on in the mind. And to discern really clearly, you have to get the mind to be still. But this is not a Catch-22. These two sides develop gradually. It's not an all-or-nothing kind of affair. As the mind gets gradually more still, you gradually see more. As you see more, it enables the mind to get even more still.

You simply find yourself leaning to one direction or the other as you practice. It's like walking. You lean to the left, you lean to right. You use your left foot, use your right. And as for whether you start out with your left foot or start out with your right, that's not something you can choose. When you sit down you may find that the mind is ready to get still, so you just follow it, allow it to be still. Other times, it's not.

So each time you sit down to meditate, take stock of the mind. How is it doing? Is it feeling inclined to settle down? Or is it not? And if it's not, what is it getting worked up about? What thoughts are preventing it from settling down? You have to work with those first. And how do you work with those thoughts? Try to make yourself a stranger to them. In other words, when you see the mind incline in a certain direction, ask yourself why on earth would you want to think about that. Allow yourself to be surprised. Look at things with new eyes, like a scientist who takes a common assumption and questions it, like Isaac Newton. Back in his days, it was believed that things fell to earth because it was simply their nature to go down. That explanation of, "it's their nature to do that" covers up a lot of ignorance. So he asked, "Why do they go down?"

And he came up with an unusual conclusion, as with the apple. Apparently he didn't really watch an apple fall. But suppose an apple falls from a tree. Not only is the earth pulling the apple down, but the apple is also pulling the earth up a little bit. But because the earth is so much bigger, it's the apple that falls. But it wasn't the nature of matter to go down necessarily as much as it's the nature of matter to attract. Of course we still don't understand that attraction. Einstein came along and said, well, actually it's a warp in space-time. He took a number of other basic assumptions and questioned them too.

It's when you question your assumptions that you see new things, because for the most part we don't even *see* our assumptions. A thought comes up about something that would be good to eat, or good to see, and we immediately think, well, it must be good to eat, it must be good to see, it must be good to think about. So ask yourself, "Why on earth? Why regard that as good to eat or good to see? Why should I be thinking about that now?" Pose those questions in the mind and see what comes up. Sometimes the simple act of putting that little question mark next to your thought is enough to kill it. It's the kind of thought that survives only because it's subterranean. As soon as it sees the light of day, it dies. Like certain worms that live underground, as soon as they are exposed to the outside air they die.

Other thoughts don't die quite so quickly, so you have to keep probing: What's the underlying assumption here? And as long as you're dealing with a thought that has a pull on the mind, but without allowing yourself to get pulled along with it, there is a chance you will see some interesting things. And when it finally strikes you that the thought is strange, and it doesn't really have that pull anymore, then the mind is ready to settle down.

Here again you can use your discernment in the other direction to remind yourself of why you want to settle down, what's to be gained from getting the mind still. And there's a lot to be gained. You see things more clearly, you are less a slave to your thoughts. The mind gets to rest. We use the mind all day long. Even when we're asleep we dream about all kinds of things. The mind needs time just to be by itself. And then you will find after a while it gets tired of being still, it wants some more action. You can either question that, or else you can make use of the mind's willingness to think by actively questioning whatever else is coming up. It depends on the situation.

So it goes back and forth like this: stillness, questioning, stillness, questioning. Sometimes the mere fact of stillness allows you to see things you didn't see before. Sometimes it doesn't. You can't always trust whatever comes up in the still mind. One of Ajaan Lee's techniques for testing insights is to ask, "To what extent is the opposite true?" For example, you start seeing how inconstant things are. He says to look for the aspect that's constant. Where it's stressful, look for the aspect that's pleasurable. And vice versa. Things that are not self—all too often we believe that if our insights fall in line with what the book says, then they must be true insights. But that's not always for certain. Turn around and question your insights. Flip them over and see to what extent the opposite is true. That way you add some nuance to your insights. And it protects you from running away. Because this can often happen. You get an insight and it starts adding on to that insight and connecting with this insight and all of a sudden you find yourself way off in the Andromeda galaxy far, far away from what's actually

going on.

The whole point of insight is you want to be able to watch the process of thoughts arising in the mind, to see where there's the intentional element to go with the thought. That's where the defilement is hiding out. Why do you want to go with a particular thought? What's its appeal?

This is why the Buddha said that seeing things arising and passing away is only part of insight. The other part is to see their allure: Why do you like the thought? What pulls you in? Then look at the drawbacks. What happens when you get pulled in by that thought? And finally what understanding allows you to escape from it? If it's something that's not arising and passing away right now, you can just put it aside. Look for the things that are arising and nibbling away at your concentration, or actually blocking your concentration. Because those are the important things to analyze.

You can read about how everything in the world is inconstant. The trees are inconstant. The mountains are inconstant. But if you're not attached to the trees or the mountains, then their inconstancy doesn't really mean anything. It's not the issue. It's where you're trying to find your pleasure, where you're attached: That's what you want to analyze in these terms. Because again, those ways of analysis make you a stranger to your thoughts, which is precisely what you want: to see them in new eyes.

Suppose someone else were looking in your head and watching your thoughts right now, and would ask you, "Why are you thinking that? Why this?" Try to be that stranger so that you don't simply take your thoughts for granted. The same with your assumptions, which contain within them all your defilements: Don't take them for granted. See them as strange. See them as curious. "Why would you believe that? Why would you want that? Why would you like that?" And when you gain some insight, question that as well until the mind has had enough of this questioning and it's ready to settle down.

This way you find your meditation leaning a little bit to the left, leaning a little bit to the right. And that way you walk along. And you find that the breath is an ideal place to do this walking. Because you can use the breath as an object to settle down and be still with, and you can also use it as a grounding for your analysis. When a thought comes up, notice how it affects the breath. Or when you breathe in a certain way, notice what that way of breathing does to the mind. If you can locate the part of the body that's tensed up around the thought, breathe through it and see what that does. This way you can walk in your breath. Leaning to the left means you lean towards investigating and questioning; you can question the breath or use the breath as a handle for the questioning. If you feel a need to lean toward the right, to get the mind to settle down and be still, okay you use the breath as a means for settling, for fully inhabiting the present

moment.

So remember that the meditation has these two sides. It needs both in order to be complete. The Buddha never made any radical distinction between the two sides. He says to get into jhana or strong absorption, you need both tranquility and insight. And to develop tranquility and insight, you need jhana. They're all part of the same whole, it's simply that you'll be leaning in one direction or the other at any one point in time. But he never has you hop all the time on one foot. Whichever foot you start out with and however long you spend on either side, that's up to you. Learn how to read the mind and its needs, and you'll find that the meditation will take you where you want to go.

Achieving Balance

November 22, 2008

An important principle in meditating, in getting the mind to settle down properly, is to develop a sense of balance so that your desire isn't so strong that it runs away with you or so weak that you don't really care. Your effort isn't so strong that it wears you out, but not so weak that you don't accomplish anything. And so on down the line. You don't want to think too much because that destroys your concentration. But it's also possible not to think enough—as when you have a problem and don't try to think it through to discover the cause.

So we're looking for balance here. But remember that balance doesn't come automatically. Think of those old-fashioned scales. Before they reach balance, they have to tip first one way and then the other and then back and forth, back and forth, gradually tipping less and less until they finally achieve balance.

This means that if you find yourself tipping one direction and then the other in your meditation, that's going to be natural. The skill lies in learning how to balance things out, so that you're tipping less and less and less.

First off, you have to realize which direction you're tipping in. This is why it's good to take stock as you sit down and meditate: How is your mind right now? What does it need? Does it need encouragement? Does it need energizing? Or does it need to be calmed down? Is it too sluggish? If it is, you have to do a little thinking to stir it up a little bit. Remember the Buddha's reflection, that this evening's sunset may have been the last one you're going to see. That big earthquake they keep warning about could happen. The new fault that just opened just to the north of us could suddenly do something strange. So the question is, if that were to happen, would you be ready to go? And for most of us the answer is No. All this unfinished business, all these things we'd still like to do. Okay, what's the most important unfinished business? Getting your mind in shape, so that it's not your own enemy in the face of sudden events. Which means that you've got to work on your meditation.

Sometimes that thought will help stir you up. Then look at what you need to do to energize the mind even further to keep it awake. You might decide that you need to go through the parts of the body. Think about the different bones in your skeleton. What have you got? Imagine all the bones starting from the toes coming on up: Where are those bones? In other words, when you think about the bones in the toe, focus on the feeling in the toe. With the bones in your feet, focus on

the feelings in your feet; and so on, up through the body. This way you give the mind work to do.

If your mind won't settle down with the bones, survey the breath energy in the different parts of your body. Start, say, at your navel, go up the front of the body, down the back, out the legs. Start again at the back of the neck, go down the shoulders and out the arms. Section by section. How does the body feel as you breathe in? How does it feel as you breathe out? If you notice any sense of tension or tightness anywhere, allow it to relax. This gives the mind work to do so that it doesn't start drifting off as it stays with the breath.

If you find, though, that your problem is in the other direction—that the mind is too active—try to stay in one place and put all your energy in trying to protect that one place. If you find your thoughts wandering off, ask yourself, “Why do I need to think about that now? Isn't it more important to get to work here?” If you're worried about situations in the future, remind yourself that your best preparation for the future is to become mindful, alert, clear about where your mind is going. All the more reason to stay focused right here to develop those qualities. And then be very protective of the spot you've chosen.

As you focus on that spot, allow it to become comfortable. A sense of comfort is important, because it helps you stay. If there's a sense of dis-ease and blockage in the body you're going to try to get out and run away from it, because the mind doesn't see any advantage in staying here. But if you see that as you stay here, things begin to dissolve away these patterns of tension, grow less and less solid, less and less rigid, just the fact of being in your body is going to feel a lot more attractive. You see immediate results—that the meditation is not simply aimed at results on and off into the future, but also gives results right here and now. And while working on blockage in one part of the body, if you're focusing right on the spot of the blockage and it doesn't seem to work, focus on other parts of the body because sometimes the blockage or pain or tightness may be caused by a blockage someplace else. It's common, for instance, that a pain in your lower back is actually caused by blockage in your upper back; or pain in your legs is caused by a blockage in your lower back or the base of the spine. Or a pain in the right side of the body is caused by a corresponding tightness on the left, something in front may be caused by something in back.

So check around, and notice how you're talking to yourself as you do this. If you have a tendency to get really harsh and negative with yourself, remind yourself we're not here to be harsh and negative. Putting in proper effort doesn't require that you hold a whip over yourself all the time. Again it's part of balance learning how to know when to use the carrot and when to use the stick. If you find yourself harsh and negative, remind yourself, “Okay, the fact that you're here meditating is good in and of itself; the ideal approach is simply to be a matter of

fact.” The mind is wandering off, okay, just bring it back. If it’s wandering off again, bring it back again. However many times it wanders off, just keep bringing it back and try to keep a good humor about the whole thing. This, combined with mindfulness, is probably your best guarantee of getting the mind into balance, so that when things aren’t going the way you’d like them to, you don’t get upset, you don’t get flustered. You simply take it into account and see what you can do to balance it out.

So try to think in ways that are encouraging. When you catch yourself wandering off, at least you’ve caught yourself. Most people wander off and never catch themselves. Their whole days, their whole lives are spent just wandering around aimlessly with no control over the mind at all, or just enough to get by. But each time you catch yourself and bring yourself back, you’re strengthening your mindfulness, you’re strengthening your alertness. That in and of itself is a good thing. It’s an accomplishment.

Reserve the stick for the times when you’re really careless and lazy. And the stick, of course, is recollection of death, something we don’t like to think about, but it’s there in the background all the time. And it’s not going to go away by our not thinking about it. So remind yourself that meditation is your best preparation for the time when you’re going to die because at that point the mind will grasp at anything. It can’t stay in the body anymore. You’re afraid of what’s going to happen if you let go of the body, but you’ve *got* to let go of the body so you grab at whatever comes up in the mind—and then there it goes, heading who knows where? So the question now is, Can you train the mind to be more composed even in that kind of circumstance, and not go flailing around?

The way to do that, of course, is to learn how to sit with the breath, and learn how to be patient with the breath, and to let go of everything else. Develop the quality of consistency. Develop your mindfulness. And keep in mind the fact that whatever comes up, you don’t want to grab onto the things that are going to be harmful. If you’re going to hold onto something, hold onto things that are skillful: the attitudes that will see you through whatever the difficulty. That won’t get blown away. If you find yourself blown away now by a little bit of pain or a little bit of distraction, it’s going to be really difficult when big pains and big distractions come. That thought is the stick to remind yourself that you’ve got work to do.

So achieving balance means that, when you find yourself leaning to the left, you’ve got to lean hard to the right. If you’re leaning to the right, lean hard to the left. Finding balance doesn’t mean using middling effort all the time. If you’ve gone to far in one direction, you’ve got to lean hard in the other direction until you reach the point of balance. Use the principle they call negative feedback, which doesn’t mean being negative about yourself. It means that if you find

yourself going too far in one direction, you learn to balance things out. All too often the mind gets into what's called positive feedback, which is not necessarily a positive thing. Positive feedback means that you're going in one direction, and you just keep tipping more and more and more in that direction. You find yourself angry, then you get angry at yourself for being angry, and then angry at yourself for being angry two times. That doesn't help. Or you find yourself getting kind of lazy and blurred out, and you say, "Well, this is kind of comfortable. I like this." Then you just go for the lazy, blurred out state of mind.

You've got to be able to step back from whatever the situation in the mind and say, "In what direction are we out of balance and how can we put it back into balance?" You'll find yourself tipping to left, tipping to the right, back and forth, but it's normal. It's natural. Over time you develop the skill so that the tipping gets less and less, gets more and more subtle, until finally you've achieved balance. There's a sense of just right. The mind fits into the body like a glove. It stays with its object, with a sense of ease and belonging. You feel like you're here at home, at last. And then all you do is simply maintain that balance.

In the course of developing that sense of "just right," you develop a lot of good qualities of mind. This is where a lot of the skill comes in the meditation. This is what the learning in the meditation amounts to: learning how to lean left and lean right when you need to, so that ultimately you get into balance. Then you learn how to stay in balance. You've probably noticed, when you watch an acrobat walking across a tightrope, that there are times when the acrobat is perfectly balanced, other times there will be a slight slipping off of balance. But the acrobat has learned how to correct for it. That's how acrobats don't fall. It's not that they never tip, but they know immediately how to tip in the other direction, back and forth, back and forth, until they are balanced again.

In the same way, even though there will be a lot of back and forth in the meditation, it aims toward balance. And it maintains your balance. So don't get upset by it. Learn how to use it to bring the mind to that state where it feels really at home: settled, secure. Or as we say in that chant, so that it "looks after itself with ease." It gains a sense of maturity, a sense of good humor and confidence that comes from experience: that you can deal with whatever comes up.

Beyond Inter-eating

November 26, 2008

In Pali the word for enjoying something is the same as the word for eating it. When you're enjoying a mind state, you're feeding on the mind state. If you enjoy a relationship, you're feeding on the relationship. And as the Buddha points out over and over again, to be in a position where you have to feed is to be in a position where you have to suffer. And not only are you suffering, but the people or whatever it is you're feeding on suffers as well. We've got to keep this point in mind: that as long as the mind needs to feed, it's causing suffering. And the greatest act of kindness both to yourself and other people is to put it in a position where it doesn't need to feed.

We tend to forget this. We think that sitting here meditating, trying to get the mind under control, is a selfish thing because we don't see how other people benefit. But actually it's one of the kindest things you can do, because if the mind is in a position where it needs to feed that means it needs a constant food source. And if you don't get the food source you want, you start scrambling around trying to find another food source, and at the same time you feel threatened, fearful. And we know what the mind does when it feels threatened and fearful: its stupidest things, most heartless things, thoughtless things, mindless things.

Someone did a study of prisoners, people who tend to live in fear not only while they're in the prison, but also when they're out on the streets in a position where they feel fearful, threatened, and commit their crimes. They did brain scans of these people and discovered that they don't use their frontal lobe very much. The lizard brain is more in action because once you're in fear, that's the part of the brain that takes over. In a situation like that, when you use the frontal lobe it's basically to rationalize what you've already done: the decisions that the lizard brain made. So the frontal lobe is there for rationalizations; it's not for reasoning. Reasoning is basically the thinking you do before you make a decision, the thinking you do that actually weighs things as to whether they're right or wrong, wise or unwise. That kind of thinking can happen only when you're not feeling threatened.

So think about it, what state is your mind in? Is it in a position where it has to feed? If so it's going to feel threatened at some point or another because all our food sources are limited, whether physical food or emotional food, mental food. If you let the mind continually feed on its thoughts, it's developing bad habits. It's in that feeding mode. So what you've got to learn how to do as a meditator is

to feed in a new way, in a way that eventually gets the mind into a position where it doesn't have to feed anymore. You have to strengthen it.

First you have to have the conviction this is something you can do, that you have it within your power to strengthen the mind in this way—in other words, that your actions and decisions really do make a difference. This conviction is what gets you started on the path. And it gives you strength you need to get started. Until you start seeing results, you need to operate on the principle of conviction, because the path requires effort and persistence. You've got to stick with it because the mind has its old habits and it's easy to slip into its old habits. You meditate for a while and things aren't going well, and you want to give the mind a hit of whatever pleasure it's used to feeding on. When that happens, you have to keep reminding yourself, no, come back, come back, come back to the breath. This is where mindfulness comes in: to keep reminding you that sitting around and thinking about whatever kind of thought you like to feed on—whether it's thoughts of kindness or thoughts of anger; skillful thoughts or unskillful thoughts—you're continuing the mind's old habits. It likes to take on an identity in these thought worlds, and that taking on an identity is precisely what needs to be fed.

So you try to develop a new identity: the meditator who's mindful, who's heading in a different direction. This is an identity that needs to be fed as well, but it's one of those identities that ultimately leads in the right direction. So keep reminding yourself, "Come back to the breath," so you can be in a position where you can watch those thought worlds, pull yourself away from them. The stronger your mindfulness, the more you get into good solid states of concentration. Again this is a skillful kind of feeding. You're feeding on the sense of ease, on the sense of rapture and refreshment that can come in the concentration. It's good food and relatively harmless. Blameless. There's nothing unskillful about it. If you can feed on this, that takes a lot of the weight and pressure off your relationships with other people, which is why concentration is an act of kindness. You're not feeding on them in the same way. You've got a better source of food inside, a more reliable source of food inside.

And it's one that can allow you to watch this process of how a thought world arises in the mind, and how you take on an identity in that thought world. Where it is that you make that decision to slip into this different world as you move out of the world of the breath and the world of the body into the world of your thought? Why do you do that? How does it happen? You've already got some practice in pulling yourself out of these thoughts simply as you develop mindfulness and concentration. But the concentration allows you to see them even more clearly as processes. You see how they form; you can see how they disband. You see the precise points where you're making a decision to move in

and continue creating more and more form and feeling and perceptions and thought constructs and consciousness in that thought world, all of which involve taking on an identity—which in turn takes a lot of food.

So only when you see the harm of that process do you realize this is what you've been doing all along. Your interactions with other people have been a kind of feeding. We don't like to think about it but interbeing, the idea that we're all connected, basically comes down to intereating. We feed on other people. Even when we're nice to them, we feed on them. And the feeding seems to come first. The niceness comes second.

This is why I see so many cases of people being nice to people in the ways they want to be nice to them, but without much thought as to what the people on the receiving end really need. It's only when you don't have to feed on people that you can really see what they need, and provide it if you can.

So these five strengths that provide food for the mind also bring it to the point, ultimately, where it sees through the need to feed; sees something even more lasting in which you don't take on a state of being, which means that you don't need to feed. There is one verse in the Canon where they talk about feeding on nibbana. You feed on it freely in the sense that there's no cost, there are no drawbacks—you're not harming anybody, you're not harming yourself, you're not harming other people. But most of the descriptions that discuss the issue of feeding with regard to nibbana say that it's a state of no hungering. You don't need to feed at all, because you're not taking on the identity in that thought world or in the world outside.

This is why meditation is an act of kindness. You're putting the mind in a position where it doesn't have to be threatened by a lack of food, because you don't need food. And even on the path, you're developing sources of food inside that require less and less and less from other people, and place less and less of a burden on yourself, less of a burden on them. So that you're less likely to be coming from that part of the lizard brain that always wants to feed, and is afraid when there's no source of food around. So that the more reasonable part of your mind can continue reasoning and not just rationalizing what you've already done. You reason about what you see as the proper thing to do in the future, or here in the present. That's the proper use of that part of your brain, but you can use it that way only when there's no sense of threat, no fear.

So when you start wondering what you're doing for the world sitting here enjoying pleasant sensations in the body—well, you're feeding on the pleasant sensations in the body, which means that you're not having to feed on other people. That in and of itself is something of a gift, but it also puts you on the path where you can go to a more advanced level, where ultimately you don't even need to feed on these pleasant states of mind, pleasant states of the body. They're

helpful and they're harmless, but the most harmless thing is a mind that doesn't have to eat, doesn't have to feed, doesn't have to enjoy things, doesn't have to indulge in things, because it has everything it already needs.

This way you're not only placing less of a burden on other people; you're also providing them with a good example: that it is possible not to feel threatened, not to feel fearful—not because you suppress your fear, but you put yourself in a different position entirely. You find a different position entirely, a position that nothing else can assail.

The Karma of Pleasure

November 29, 2008

A couple years back, when the psychology of happiness was beginning to become popular, I was asked to review a book on the topic to give a Buddhist perspective on the issue. I said one of the things the book was missing was an understanding of karma, that in your pursuit for happiness, you do things that have an impact on other people, and have an impact on yourself. And so you have to weigh the happiness that you get from those actions against their long-term results. And the editor of the magazine that I wrote this for said he was surprised that I had focused on that as the Buddhist issue, while I was surprised that he was surprised.

Because the principle of cause and effect is what the Buddha said lay at the heart of his awakening. When he summarized his awakening in one sentence, he'd state it as the principle of "when this is, that is; when this isn't, that isn't; from the arising of this comes the arising of that; from the cessation of this comes the cessation of that." Then he would expand on what that meant. But that for him was the essence of his awakening, in particular "the arising of this" or the "when this is."

One of the big issues, of course, is the arising of your intentions. When intentions arise, what happens? These intentions have both an immediate impact and a long-term impact. We have to take both into consideration as we look for happiness, because sometimes the things we do will give a short-term happiness, but then in the long term they cause trouble for ourselves and for other people.

I was amazed that the book on happiness didn't consider at all how people's conception of happiness would actually have an impact on other people. The book was trying to be scientific. It said, well, sometimes torturers and terrorists have their views on happiness, and who are we as objective observers to pass judgment on them? But of course you have to take into consideration the impact these activities have on other people, because other people aren't going to just sit still and let you enjoy a happiness that's going to cause them suffering. Even if they die from your efforts, they're going to come back. Their relatives and friends are going to come back at you. That's built into the way things are.

So as you look for pleasure and happiness in life, you've got to take into consideration what you're doing to get that happiness, and what the long-term impact of that doing is going to be. Pleasure, happiness, bliss, ease: the Pali word

for all of those things is *sukha*. And as you look for *sukha*, what is it? It's a feeling. Feelings are fabricated. In other words, even in the experiencing of a feeling, there's already a certain amount of intention. We have potentials that come in from our past actions and then our present intentions shape those potentials into a feeling. That's what the mind spends a lot of its time creating all the time.

We're doing it right here as we meditate. We've got a body that's relatively healthy. We have a certain amount of experience with the breath. That's the past karma we're working with. And then we're trying to fashion that past karma into an experience of well-being in the present moment. In the beginning, you focus on trying to create a sense of ease and well-being with the breath. To get established in that sense of ease, you have to indulge in it. That too is a type of action, a type of karma. You create the feeling and then you settle in it. But the trick is that if you simply wallow in the feeling of pleasure and let go of the breath, the pleasure's not going to last very long.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a person who works and gains a salary. Some people, as soon as they get their first paycheck, skip work and spend their money. To keep getting your paycheck, you have to keep on working. If you want to get a raise, you have to keep on working well. The same principle applies to the meditation. If you stick with the breath, even in the midst of the pleasure, the pleasure keeps on coming. If you get more skilled in how you stay with the breath, the pleasure increases. Even when you don't wallow in it, it's still there, doing its work for your wellbeing. And you're allowed to enjoy the pleasure because this is a blameless pleasure.

The Buddha, like so many rich people, led a life of total indulgence when he was still a prince. When he left the home life, he went off to the other extreme. He was afraid of pleasure. He had seen the impact of pleasure on his mind, that it made him intoxicated, blurred his understanding. So he ran off in the other direction: total self-torture. He would go into a trance where he wouldn't allow himself to breathe; and even though it caused huge pains in the body, he just stuck with it. He would eat as little as possible, till he would faint each time he would urinate or defecate. And finally, after six years of that, he realized that this was as far as you can go in self-torment: fainting and growing weak. It didn't lead to awakening. The question was: Could there be another way? Because self-torment obviously wasn't getting results.

He recollected a time when he was a child and had naturally entered the first jhana. He asked himself, "Could this be the way?" And something inside him said, "Yes." "If so, why am I afraid of that pleasure?" Because prior to that he had lumped all pleasure together as bad. He asked himself, "Is there anything blameworthy about that pleasure?" "No. It doesn't harm anybody else. It doesn't intoxicate the mind, doesn't blur your awareness." He said, "Okay, this is a

pleasure I can pursue.” But he realized also that he would have to eat if he was going to have the strength to do that. That’s how he got onto the middle path, realizing that there are some pleasures whose pursuit is blameless.

So that’s why we’re here: to develop this blameless sense of pleasure and then to use it further. You don’t just stop with the pleasure. You try to use it as a basis for understanding the mind even further. Particularly, you want to understand the issue of suffering. You want to comprehend it. That’s the duty the Buddha says we have with regard to suffering and stress: You want to comprehend it. You comprehend it by knowing it so thoroughly that you become dispassionate toward it. Ordinarily you might not think that we have passion for suffering, but we do. So many things that we enjoy in life involve suffering and stress. Yet we get quite passionate about them.

So you want to understand the process through which you’re creating a lot of unnecessary stress, a lot of unnecessary suffering, both for yourself and for others. See the drawbacks of that kind of attachment, that kind of passion. And the only way you’re going to see those drawbacks is to give yourself a more blameless form of pleasure, so you can look at, say, sensual pleasure, and not be so hungry for it. If you’re hungering for it, it’s got to be good. That’s the attitude we have.

But if you can appease that hunger for pleasure with the pleasure of a well-concentrated mind, then you can look at these other pleasures and willingly admit that they do have their drawbacks. They involve intoxication. You have to blot out large areas of your awareness if you’re going to enjoy them. It’s like listening to a concert of music. The concert hall is designed so that you lose your awareness of other people. It’s dark. Everybody is supposed to be quiet. You don’t want anything interfering with your experience of the music. And so you have to blot out large areas of your awareness: your awareness of the people around you, your awareness of any background noise. That’s one of the drawbacks of that kind of pleasure. The mind becomes less attuned to a lot of things. It has to blot out huge areas of awareness so that it can wallow in what it wants to focus on.

That’s a metaphor for a lot of our lives, and the pleasures that we have. We have to pretend that a lot of things aren’t there so we can focus exclusively on the details we like. That’s pleasure.

And then there’s pain. How do you deal with, how are you going to comprehend pain? Because for most of us, our experience with pain is that we want to push it away. We feel threatened by it, invaded by it. And the only way you’re going to actually comprehend it is to have this alternative foundation for the mind, a place where you take a stance and can feel at ease, settled, secure—secure enough that you can then look into the pain and not feel so threatened by it; have a certain amount of objectivity in the way you look at it, so you can really comprehend, “Oh, pain comes from this, and this is what I’ve been doing to

create it.” Only when the mind has this sense of an inner security from the concentration can it really perform our duty with regard to stress, which is to comprehend it to the point of dispassion.

So that’s the skillful way to deal with pleasure, the skillful kind of karma around pleasure. Try to create a pleasure that’s harmless, then use that experience of pleasure for a further purpose. That’s not the way we usually relate to pleasure. We like to indulge in it. And we don’t like to hear that there’s karma associated with that. We want our pleasures to be free. The only pleasure that’s really free, though, as the Buddha said, is nibbana. Even the practice of jhana requires that we have a body that’s alive and needs to feed, so there’s a certain amount of burdensomeness placed on other people, other beings. The only truly free pleasure is one that’s not even a feeling. As the Buddha says, it’s a pleasure that doesn’t come under the five aggregates. It’s known by a consciousness that doesn’t come out of the five aggregates, and isn’t known by means of the sense media. That’s something really special.

But the only way to find that is, first, to develop this ability to create a sense of ease and well-being within the body through the breath, a sense of ease and well-being that come from secluding the mind from unskillful states, getting the mind concentrated, and really seeing the karma of pleasure. This is what you’ve got to do in order to create a sense of well-being that’s relatively blameless. Then you can use that pleasure for the purpose of even higher pleasure, an even more blameless pleasure: free both in the sense that you don’t have to spend any money for it, you don’t have to do anything for it, and in the sense that you’re not harming anybody at all because it’s totally outside of the patterns of cause and effect.

But to get there, you have to understand how pleasure—our usual experience of pleasure—is totally enmeshed in cause and effect. Then you have to weigh the things that you’re doing to give rise to that pleasure, the things you do as a result of that pleasure, and then the impact they have on other people. All those things have to be weighed very carefully. But when you approach the issue with wisdom and understanding, you finally can get to the thing we all want: the pleasure that’s totally free.

So as you go through life and find yourself consuming pleasures, realize that there’s an intentional activity even in the production of the pleasure, in the experiencing of the pleasure, and in the enjoyment of the pleasure. Try to become as sensitive as possible to what that intention is, and what its effects are, so that your attitude toward pleasure can become more responsible, and more productive on the path that leads to a pleasure that’s totally free.

The Rivers of Karma

December 7, 2008

When you're meditating, you're engaging in a form of karma, which the Buddha identified with intention. The intention here is to stay with the breath, to try to be fully aware of the breath element in the body, throughout the whole body. You want to maintain that intention in the face of all the other intentions that are going to come up in the course of the hour. It's to be expected. Vagrant thoughts will come into the mind about tomorrow, about today, yesterday. And you've got to realize that those thoughts are not in line with the original intention. No matter how useful or important they may seem, they're not what you want right now. You're trying to be very clear about what your intention is right now and how to stick with it.

Because this is really all you've got: your present intention. Think about times when you're ill, when difficult situations come up in life, and you look around and there seems to be no means of escape. Actually, though, there is an escape. Your one escape will be the intentions in your mind at that time. Say that there's a pain coming up. You're ill, and no matter what painkiller the doctors give you, there's still pain. How are you going to deal with it? Your best way of dealing with it has to do with your intention. Remind yourself that if you think about how long you've been in pain, or how much longer you're going to be in pain, that's going to weigh the mind down unnecessarily. You want to simply be aware of the sensation of the pain right now, without all those other narratives. As for the questions of why there's pain and whether it's just or how frustrated you may feel about it, you've got to learn how to put those aside as well. In other words, as you're sitting here meditating putting aside random thoughts, you're getting practice for a skill you're really going to need as aging, illness, and death come closing in.

As the Buddha said there are two ways of developing qualities of mind that are really helpful in cases like that. One is to learn how to develop unlimited goodwill for all beings, yourself included, and the people around you. He says, when the mind has that unlimited quality it's like a huge river. Someone may come along and try to make the river stop, but they can't make the river stop because the river is so large. They can try to make the river be without water, they'll try to dump it out with pails, but they can't do that because there is so much water in the river. Even if you put a lump of salt in the river, you can still drink the water because there is so much more water in the river.

As you're able to maintain that unlimited state of mind, the issues that come up with pain and illness, or as death approaches, will seem a lot smaller than if your mind is limited and concerned only with the narratives that you've been carrying around all the time. This is another way in which meditation is good for you. You learn how to step out of those narratives. When aging, illness, and death come, you see it as an opportunity to handle them skillfully. Because part of that unlimited frame of mind reminds you that everybody goes through these things. You're not being singled out. This is a universal process. That helps take some of the sting away.

The other skills you need, as the Buddha said, are learning how to keep the mind from being overcome by pain and being overcome by pleasure. And again these are among the skills you learn as you're meditating. Pain comes up in the body, and you learn the appropriate ways of dealing with it. In some cases that means focusing on another part of the body that's not in pain to give the mind a sense of safe haven here in the present moment. When it has developed a sense of strength, the sense of well-being that can come from that sense of have, then you can start looking into the pain. To what extent is the pain affected by the way you breathe? To what extent is it affected by your concepts about the pain? If you regard the experience of pain as a total given, it's hard to get away from it. But if you realize you're involved in constructing the pain, your concept of it is going to have an actual effect on how you experience it.

The mind is built in this way. You've got all these pain receptors in your body, along with the various parts of your nervous system that make the decision as to which little pains you're going to pay attention to and which ones you're going to ignore. Most of this happens on a sub-conscious level, but as you meditate you train yourself to become more conscious of it. You learn how to take that ability to focus and ignore, and use it deliberately for the purpose of keeping the mind from suffering. This is a skill we learn as we meditate.

At the same time, we learn how not to be overcome by pleasure. First there are sensual pleasures, which we tend to go running to as our main escape from pain. And as long as we see them as our only escape, we don't like to look at their negative side. But it's an important skill in the meditation. If you really want the mind to settle down and gain good solid concentration to develop insight, you've got to learn how to look at the downside of sensual pleasures—how unreliable they are, and how they make you do all kinds of stupid things, or how you make yourself do stupid things just to keep them going.

But to really let go of these pleasures requires more than just seeing their drawbacks. It also requires that you find an alternative pleasure. That's the pleasure that comes from keeping the mind still. As the Buddha said, there's no true pleasure aside from peace. So you look for your pleasure, for your happiness

in the mind at peace, allowing it to be still, allowing it to be centered, and learning how to maintain it—that stillness, that sense of being centered—regardless of what comes up.

Some of your first practice in this is when you finally settle down and the breath is calm; it feels refreshing. When that happens, it's very easy to lose your focus on the breath and move over to the sense of pleasure. It's like falling into a hole. You're skating on ice, and all of a sudden you skate off to where it's too thin, and fall through the ice into water. In other words, you've abandoned the cause, because you've gotten so infatuated with the effect. But if you can realize that the effect is still there, the pleasure is still there in the body, and you don't have to go rushing after it, you don't have to go gobbling it down, it will still have its good effects on the body and its good effects on the mind even as you stay focused on the breath. You see it as not something that you're going to jump on, but simply as a sign that the mind is beginning to settle down. You're beginning to see results in the meditation.

It's like a sign on the road. When you pass a sign that says you're entering such and such a town, or there's a town ex-number of miles ahead, you don't leave the road to drive on the sign. You stay on the road.

In the same way, you stay with the breath. In this way you learn how to use the pleasure of concentration without being overwhelmed by it. Now, it's not that you're afraid of the pleasure of concentration. I don't know many times you hear the topic of jhana or concentration introduced, and almost the first thing they say before they've even told you what it is, they tell you it's dangerous. That's a really perverse approach. Right concentration is not dangerous in that way. It helps separate you from the dangers of being sucked in by sensual pleasures; it provides you with an alternative to sensual pleasures. As the Buddha points out, there's no abandoning our attachment for sensual pleasures until we can develop the sense of ease that comes from getting the mind still, centered, solidly based in the present.

This is how you teach the mind not to be overcome by pleasure or pain. Pain becomes a tool an opportunity to learn about how the mind creates unnecessary suffering for itself around the pain. Pleasure too becomes a tool, part of the path. You don't want to see pleasure and pain as things to run away from or to run toward, but as tools you can use to give the mind more and more freedom. That way, if the body begins to wear down and the rest of your life begins to unravel, you don't lose your bearings. You realize that your happiness isn't based on a particular narrative. It doesn't have to be based on the body. It has a deeper foundation inside. And whatever the results of past bad actions you've done, if you develop these tools of having a sense of limitlessness in the mind—limitless goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, and a proper understanding

of pleasure and pain so you are not overcome by them—you'll have your escape.

These are precisely the tools we learn as we meditate, teaching the mind to stay with the breath, and then using the breath as a tool for gaining greater and greater understanding.

This is why when the Buddha explains issues of karma, he doesn't use mechanical images. His images are all fluid. We all have unskillful decisions, unskillful intentions that we've acted on in the past, but it doesn't mean we have to suffer from them. They will have their effects but their effects are going to be mitigated or amplified by your present karma. It's as if we have two rivers coming together. If you've ever been at the spot where the Little Colorado joins the Colorado, you see two very different kinds of water. The Little Colorado is very muddy; the Colorado is clear. And right at the spot where they join it's a mixture of the two. But as you go downstream, the muddiness disappears and the water is all clear. That's because the Colorado is bigger than the Little Colorado; the muddiness is overcome by the clarity of the water the larger river.

This is what you want to do in your meditation. You want to make sure that your present karma is a bigger river of clear water. It'll take care of the silt that comes in from the little river if you develop the skills that can keep your present intentions clear and in focus. So this is our opportunity right here as we meditate, to keep this river of present karma as clear and as large as possible.

The Luminous Mind

December 8, 2008

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says that the mind is *pabhassaram*: luminous or radiant. He says that when people don't realize this, they can't develop their minds; they can't train the mind. When you realize that the mind is luminous and that its defilements are visitors, then you can train the mind.

In other words, if you believe that greed, anger, and delusion permanently stain the mind, then you believe you can't train yourself. You can't develop the mind. You have to depend on outside forces, outside agents to come and save you. But when you realize that the defilements of greed, anger, and delusion come and visit it—in other words, they don't necessarily own it, they don't leave a permanent stain—then you can train it.

And notice: The Buddha's not saying that the mind is naturally good or that its luminosity is its awakened state. Luminosity here simply means that it knows. Ajaan Maha Boowa has noted that if the Buddha had said the mind is pure by nature, you could argue with him: If it's pure, how can defilements come into it? But the Buddha simply says that it's luminous, which means it can know. Each moment we are able to be aware of things. No matter how many times greed, anger, and delusion have come into the mind, they go. There's always the possibility that you can notice their coming and going, see the effects of their coming and going, and realize that you have the choice of siding with them or not.

That's what enables you to train the mind. No matter how thick the darkness of the mind, it's possible to shine a light in it. And once you shine the light, the darkness can't say, "I've been here for long a time; a tiny little light has no right to drive me away right away." That's not the way light and darkness interact. As soon as light comes, the darkness is gone.

Now you've probably noticed in your practice that there are many times when light comes and then disappears, and the darkness comes back again. That's because your clarity of mind is not yet continuous. But it is something that can be developed. As the Buddha says, we suffer from ignorance partly because of internal causes. In other words, hindrances like sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restless and anxiety, uncertainty obscure the mind. And they keep ignorance going. There's also inappropriate attention. When looking at the

hindrances, or looking at the world, we're not really interested in the question of suffering or how to put an end to suffering. We've got other issues, other things we're more interested in. This is related to the external causes that keep ignorance going. We hang around with the wrong people. We don't listen to the Dhamma. Or even when we do, we don't take it seriously.

So these are the things that keep the darkness going: inappropriate attention and lack of noble friends. Even though the mind has the potential where it can know and be aware, these other factors influence it, which is why we need to train the mind in concentration to overcome the hindrances. To do this, of course, depends on seeing at some point that the reason we're suffering is not because of somebody else somewhere else, or the economic conditions, or the environment or whatever. It's our own ignorance. The moment of clarity that makes us realize we've got to work on ourselves: That's why we look for the right people, want to listen to the Dhamma, want to understand it, and want to practice.

It's during those moments of clarity when you really see the connection between your actions and the suffering you experience—when you recognize your own foolishness: That's when you're less willfully ignorant and can start willing in the other direction. As the description of right effort says, you generate the desire to get rid of unskillful qualities. You generate the desire to develop skillful qualities in their place. These are all activities in the mind. That word "qualities" here, *dhamma*, can also mean actions. Remember that actions are not just things you do with the body, but also things you do with the mind. The path is something you fabricate. It's something you will—a truth of the will. In other words, if you don't will it, it won't become true for you.

So this is what we're working on right now, trying to give the desire for what's skillful more power over the mind, so that there can be more moments of clarity, so that we can begin to weaken the causes of ignorance. And ignorance here is not just a general lack of knowledge. It's very closely connected with inappropriate attention. We're looking at the wrong things. We know the wrong things or we frame the issues of our life in the wrong way. We need to become more and more consistent in looking at things in terms of the principle of skillful action, and then in terms of the principle of where there's suffering, what's causing it, what we can do to put an end to it. We want to make those questions the big questions in life. Ordinarily we miss out on these questions because so many other questions really seem insistent—the things we pick up from our own random ideas or from the general values of society—which is one of the reasons why meditation requires that we learn to question the values we were brought up with, the ideas we picked up in the past, our narratives about the past, the way we cast those narratives.

When you look back on your life, learn to recast the narrative. You can't just drop the old narratives of your life, pretend that they didn't happen, that you've shut the door on them and you're no longer involved. They'll just keep sloshing around in the mind in the same old terms in which you've been framing them before. So you've got to reframe those narratives. Look at them in terms of where there was suffering, why there was suffering, what activity kept you suffering on and on and on in that particular way, and when you finally began to realize that you had to drop that kind of activity—that you *could* drop that kind of activity. When you can look at your life in that way, it's a lot easier to look at the present moment in the right way as well.

So the process of meditation is not just pinning the mind in the present moment and putting it through the grinder of a particular technique, regardless of how you've been living your life. It's learning to reframe the issues of life, getting a stronger sense of the importance of the questions the Buddha asked, and of the need to develop the path that can put an end to the suffering you've been causing and experiencing. In the process of developing the path, we're going to be developing skillful qualities, learning how to abandon the things that get in the way of knowledge and to encourage qualities like mindfulness and alertness that strengthen your knowledge, strengthen your awareness, strengthen your insight and discernment.

These things, like the defilements, are not part of the nature of the mind. Ajaan Lee has a good passage where he points out that the mind is neither good nor evil, but it's what *knows* good and evil, and it's what *does* good and evil, and ultimately it's what *lets go* of good and evil. That luminosity of the mind is neither good nor evil, but it does allow you to know. It creates the circumstances in which skillful qualities can be brought into being, in which they can do their work to bring the mind to a place where it goes beyond both the good and the evil, beyond that luminosity.

Which means that the path is not inevitable. A brahman once asked the Buddha, "Is everybody going to gain awakening?" And he refused to answer. Ven. Ananda was afraid that the brahman would go away misunderstanding, thinking that the Buddha was stymied by the question, and so he took the brahman aside and said, "Suppose there was a fortress with a wise gatekeeper and only one gate into the fortress. The gatekeeper would walk around the walls of the fortress and wouldn't see any other means of entry into the fortress, not even a hole big enough for cat to slip through. He wouldn't know how many people would eventually come into the fortress, but he would know that everybody who was going to come in and out of the fortress had to come in and out through the gate." In the same way, Ananda said, the Buddha realized that whoever was going to gain awakening would have to come through the path of the noble eightfold

path, the seven factors for awakening, and the different sets in the wings to awakening. As for how many people would follow that path, that wasn't his concern.

So it's not inevitable that we're going to gain awakening. In other words, we don't have an awakened nature that forces us to gain awakening at some point. What we do have is a desire for happiness, and a luminous mind that can know. It's capable of knowing that there is suffering and it's capable of watching, developing the qualities that allow you to see where the suffering comes from, and to see that it's not necessary, that you can put an end to it.

This is important—because sometimes when people gain a luminous state of mind, or a wide-open state of mind, they think they've hit their awakened nature. But the luminosity is not part of awakening. It's a condition that allows the mind to see, but the awakening comes from our determination not to keep on suffering. That was Ajaan Mun's last message to his students: You're a warrior doing battle with defilement, with discernment as your prime weapon. And what in the mind is the warrior? The determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements; the determination not to suffer again. Don't let go of that determination, he said, until it has done its job.

So there's a necessary element of willing in the path. Without that willing, it just doesn't happen. The luminosity of the mind is what allows the will to do its work, allows us to straighten out our own minds, to train our own minds. We don't have to go around hoping for some outside power to come and save us. We've got our ability here to see the connection between suffering and its cause, and to find the path to the cessation of suffering, with which you can let go of the defilements. When there are no more defilements, you can let go of the path, which is composed just of activities, because you've found something that's not an activity, something that's not fabricated. That's what we're working on.

But you can't clone the unfabricated. You've got to do the work. You've got to develop the factors that give rise to clarity of mind, clarity of vision that can push away those clouds of defilement. When you get the causes right, the effects will take care of themselves.

So try to be very clear about what you're doing, because that's a huge area where ignorance lies: around what we're doing and the results of what we're doing. We tend to be very willful about not wanting to admit to ourselves what we're doing or what our intentions are. We also tend to be very willful about not wanting to see the unfortunate effects of some of our actions. This is why the Buddha, when he was giving instructions to his son, focused on just this issue, telling him, "Look at what you're going to do, look at what you're doing, and look at what you've done. Try to be very clear about the results of your actions." That reflection is how you begin to see through the clouds of delusion that

otherwise keep moving in, moving in, moving in all the time. When you can see through your delusion, you realize that it doesn't have to be there all the time.

This principle is what allows us to practice. This principle is what gives us hope, confidence, that there is an end to suffering. If you act on it, there will come a day when it's not just a hope or confidence; it's actual knowledge that there is a deathless and it's totally free from suffering of every kind.

Values

December 20, 2008

When you focus on the breath and try to stay focused on the breath, it's partly a matter of technique and partly a matter of your values. The technique can be explained in just a few pages—Ajaan Lee's seven steps take just two or three pages. And they cover a lot of the territory in the technique: focusing on the breath, finding a spot in the body where you can stay centered, and then working from there to let the breath energy feel good throughout the body, so that it's all connected together, noticing what kind of breathing then can maintain a sense of connectedness and comfort in the body. That's pretty much the technique.

But there's also the question of values—why you're meditating. And sometimes you can see your sense of values influencing the technique. If you come with the idea that you want to gain a vision, you'll find yourself pushing the technique in the direction of a vision. If you want to clamp down and have no awareness of your body at all, you can do that. You can push the technique in that direction as well.

So it's important to understand that as we're developing concentration, the important element is balance: a sense of ease, comfort, well-being inside. It's not as flashy or as extreme as we sometimes want to go in the meditation. But it's got a lot more value. Value for what? Value in that it allows you to observe the mind, to understand what drives the mind, and particularly what drives the mind to create suffering. We all want pleasure. We all want happiness. Yet we find ourselves doing things that lead to unhappiness. And even though we may know better, we tend to persist with our old bad habits.

This is where our values come in. Understanding why it's important to focus on training the mind, why it's important to have this sense of centered well-being: This comes in with the element of right effort called generating desire. You have to make yourself *want* to do this in order to do it well. And there are times when it's easy to want it. You find that things click. Everything falls into place. It feels really good being with the breath, really good being centered right here. You can't imagine why you would ever leave. But then you find yourself leaving, even when things are going well—which means you have to dig deeper to find out why.

As for when things are not going well, that's when your sense of values has to kick in, to understand why you stick with this even when you leave the

monastery and go back home. Why would you want to stay with the breath as you're dealing with other people, dealing with your work? Or even if you're staying here, there are times when you find it hard to stick with the practice. This is where it's good to remind yourself: Exactly what is this all about?

That chant we had just now on the nature of the world—basically it's undependable, inconstant, stressful, not self. And what people do is so much driven by their craving. Now, part of the mind says, So what? That's the part of the mind you've got to look into. What does it want to do? Why does it want to stay a slave to craving? We all know about aging, illness, and death. The passage we chanted just now draws the parallels between aging and inconstancy, stress and illness, not-self and death. These things go together. And they can't be denied. That's the way the world is.

But part of the mind says, "Well, I want to do this or that in spite of all that. This training of the mind is getting in the way." And one of the questions you can ask in response is, "How much more do you want to suffer? Do you really love yourself?" If you really love yourself, you try to figure out how to find a happiness you can depend on. But then the mind will say, "Well, I'll wait for that later. There are some other things I want to do in the meantime." This is where the quality of heedfulness comes in, realizing there may not *be* a later. You may not have that chance any time soon to come back to the practice. And your willingness to see what your true best interests are—that's a lot of the wisdom of the practice.

A while back I was reading a history of the 19th century that discussed one of the favorite types of literature back in those days: biographies of great people. People really enjoyed reading lives of great people. The typical story was that someone started out with a lot of handicaps and yet was able to make his way up. Most of the stories were about "him," men. But the novels of the time were also filled with women who were willing to make sacrifices for the sake of a greater happiness. Then some time in the 20th century, the taste changed. We liked our antiheroes: the people who saw through the sham of trying to make yourself something better than what you currently are. We're now more concerned about the honesty of people admitting their true feelings right now. Rather than trying to make themselves into something, they just want to stay where they are and explore where they are. And the honesty of that approach is presented as an ideal.

Now they did see through a lot of the sham in the Victorian era, but they really misunderstood what it means to be true to yourself. It doesn't mean that you just stay the way you are, or accept the way you are. It means that you really look at yourself and see what potentials you have. Where is the potential for suffering in your life? Where is the potential for happiness in your life? And maybe that is a noble quest: to find a true happiness, to develop all the good

qualities of mind that at the moment you have only in a rudimentary form, or potential form, to try to actualize them. In other words, it's not a matter of pretending to be something that you aren't, but simply realizing that you do have a potential to make something more of yourself.

One way of helping that process is to get yourself out of your individual narratives and go look at the larger shape of things. This may be one of the reasons why, on the night of his awakening, the Buddha started out with that knowledge of his past lives. But then from there, he didn't go straight into the present moment. He inclined his mind to that second knowledge as well, seeing all beings throughout the universe die and then be reborn in line with their karma. It was in seeing the larger picture that he also saw the larger pattern. The way our lives go is dependent on our actions. Where do our actions come from? They come from our views and our intentions, the two acting together. So he realized that that was the area where his mind really needed to be trained, in terms of how he looked at things, and how he aimed his actions, his motivations, his purposes in acting, speaking, thinking.

Once he saw the larger picture, it was a lot easier get into the present moment and to stay there, to focus on the right things in the present moment. Where is the potential for greater understanding in the present moment? He said it was looking at the question of suffering. Where is there suffering right now? What's creating it? What can you do to put an end to it? His willingness to look at the world at large was what got him focused properly and kept him going on the path.

The same with that passage we chanted just now from the *Ratthapala Sutta*. It was Ratthapala's reason for ordaining. Notice he didn't say, "I am subject to aging, illness, and death." He said, "This is the way the world is, the world as a whole." You go out and look at it. It's swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There is no one in charge. It has nothing of its own. It's a slave to craving. That's the way things are everywhere.

Again and again, the Buddha points this out as an important part of growing up and developing a more mature attitude, a more mature set of values: looking at the world as a whole. Where is it going? We have that chant frequently: "I am subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. I am the heir to my actions." That's part of a sutta where the Buddha goes on to say that you should also reflect that it's not just you. Everybody, no matter where you go, no matter what kind of life you live: All people are subject to aging, illness, and death. Everybody is subject to separation. Everybody is the heir to his or her actions. And that principle of action is what provides the escape.

So what this means is that, as we're meditating, we're not pretending to be somebody we aren't. We meditate because we love ourselves. We have

compassion for ourselves. We realize that making some sacrifices now will lead to good results down the line, the results we want. A part of this is taken on faith. We hear about the Deathless. We hear about Nirvana. And sometimes it sounds like a story, a fairytale or, as one person said, an archetype. And we have to take it on trust that this is an actuality. Ajaan Maha Boowa was saying that if he could bring Nirvana out and show it to everybody, everybody would want it. No questions asked. We take that on faith. But then we look around us. What is life like without that possibility? It's a pretty depressing prospect.

When Ratthapala decided to ordain, it wasn't because he just stopped with, "The world is a slave to craving," as if that were the end of everything. That's the way things were, but he was also looking for another possibility, a way out. It's because we value the possibility of freedom, that possibility of a true happiness: That's why we make the sacrifices we do. It may be something as simple as dealing with a difficult person, and realizing that you should stay with your breath first, rather than getting absorbed in the drama. Or dealing with the desire to indulge yourself. There's a modern tendency to believe that by indulging ourselves, we show our love for ourselves. Well, in some sense, the Victorians had it right. If you really love yourself, you want to make something more out of yourself than you are at the moment, which may mean making sacrifices. It's learning how to make the sacrifice in a way that's intelligent. You're not denying the existence of your other urges. You're fully aware that you've got these other desires, these other tendencies, these other cravings. But you also realize that no matter how real they are, they're not your true friends. Either you have to do battle with them or you have to convert them.

So this is what heedfulness teaches us. That's one of the main motivations the Buddha gives for generating desire to stay on the path. The other, interestingly enough, is a sense of pride: "I've come this far. I've learned this much about the Dharma. It would be a shame if I dropped it." So pride has its uses on the path as well. Only it's not the false pride of pretending to be someone you're not. It's the pride of someone who doesn't want to be a traitor to him or herself; of someone who wants to be able to look in the mirror every morning and say, "I'm doing my best." There's that question asked in one of the passages: "Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming right now?" Hopefully not -just becoming an older person. Hopefully doing something with this in-and-out breath to gain some deeper understanding as to why there is suffering, and what can be done to stop it. And realizing that finding an answer to that question is one of the most important things you can do.

In the process of developing the path, we're going to be developing skillful qualities, learning how to abandon the things that get in the way of knowledge and to encourage qualities like mindfulness and alertness that strengthen your

knowledge, strengthen your awareness, strengthen your insight and discernment.

These things, like the defilements, are not part of the nature of the mind. Ajaan Lee has a good passage where he points out that the mind is neither good nor evil, but it's what *knows* good and evil, and it's what *does* good and evil, and ultimately it's what *lets go* of good and evil. That luminosity of the mind is neither good nor evil, but it does allow you to know. It creates the circumstances in which skillful qualities can be brought into being, in which they can do their work to bring the mind to a place where it goes beyond both the good and the evil, beyond that luminosity.

Which means that the path is not inevitable. A brahman once asked the Buddha, "Is everybody going to gain awakening?" And he refused to answer. Ven. Ananda was afraid that the brahman would go away misunderstanding, thinking that the Buddha was stymied by the question, and so he took the brahman aside and said, "Suppose there was a fortress with a wise gatekeeper and only one gate into the fortress. The gatekeeper would walk around the walls of the fortress and wouldn't see any other means of entry into the fortress, not even a hole big enough for cat to slip through. He wouldn't know how many people would eventually come into the fortress, but he would know that everybody who was going to come in and out of the fortress had to come in and out through the gate." In the same way, Ananda said, the Buddha realized that whoever was going to gain awakening would have to come through the path of the noble eightfold path, the seven factors for awakening, and the different sets in the wings to awakening. As for how many people would follow that path, that wasn't his concern.

So it's not inevitable that we're going to gain awakening. In other words, we don't have an awakened nature that forces us to gain awakening at some point. What we do have is a desire for happiness, and a luminous mind that can know. It's capable of knowing that there is suffering and it's capable of watching, developing the qualities that allow you to see where the suffering comes from, and to see that it's not necessary, that you can put an end to it.

This is important—because sometimes when people gain a luminous state of mind, or a wide-open state of mind, they think they've hit their awakened nature. But the luminosity is not part of awakening. It's a condition that allows the mind to see, but the awakening comes from our determination not to keep on suffering. That was Ajaan Mun's last message to his students: You're a warrior doing battle with defilement, with discernment as your prime weapon. And what in the mind is the warrior? The determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements; the determination not to suffer again. Don't let go of that determination, he said, until it has done its job.

So there's a necessary element of willing in the path. Without that willing, it

just doesn't happen. The luminosity of the mind is what allows the will to do its work, allows us to straighten out our own minds, to train our own minds. We don't have to go around hoping for some outside power to come and save us. We've got our ability here to see the connection between suffering and its cause, and to find the path to the cessation of suffering, with which you can let go of the defilements. When there are no more defilements, you can let go of the path, which is composed just of activities, because you've found something that's not an activity, something that's not fabricated. That's what we're working on.

But you can't clone the unfabricated. You've got to do the work. You've got to develop the factors that give rise to clarity of mind, clarity of vision that can push away those clouds of defilement. When you get the causes right, the effects will take care of themselves.

So try to be very clear about what you're doing, because that's a huge area where ignorance lies: around what we're doing and the results of what we're doing. We tend to be very willful about not wanting to admit to ourselves what we're doing or what our intentions are. We also tend to be very willful about not wanting to see the unfortunate effects of some of our actions. This is why the Buddha, when he was giving instructions to his son, focused on just this issue, telling him, "Look at what you're going to do, look at what you're doing, and look at what you've done. Try to be very clear about the results of your actions." That reflection is how you begin to see through the clouds of delusion that otherwise keep moving in, moving in, moving in all the time. When you can see through your delusion, you realize that it doesn't have to be there all the time.

This principle is what allows us to practice. This principle is what gives us hope, confidence, that there is an end to suffering. If you act on it, there will come a day when it's not just a hope or confidence; it's actual knowledge that there is a deathless and it's totally free from suffering of every kind.

The Freedom to Give

December 28, 2008

As you sit down to meditate, one of the first things you want to do is to establish a sense of well-being. This is easiest if your life has been conducive to establishing a sense of well-being. If you've been making a practice of being generous, if you're clear about the principles and precepts that you want to follow in your behavior of not harming other people, not harming yourself, then that right there creates a sense of well-being as you reflect back on your generosity, reflect back on your virtue, think of the times when you went out of your way to be good to other people, when you went out of your way to avoid doing harm to other people. And that's food for the mind.

This is why generosity and virtue are part of the path. As the Buddha said when he started teaching Right View on the most mundane level, it starts as simply, "There are gifts." That sounds strange, that that would be a principle of Right View. But he was countering a thought that was widespread or at least had some adherents in that time: that everything in life was deterministic, that causality was a mechanical process, that the stars acted through you, or there were other outside forces that had totally determined from the very beginning from the design of the universe, that things were going to have to work out a certain way. Therefore whatever you did was meaningless. It was simply part of the machinery. For that reason, an act of generosity doesn't have any special value; it's just written into the way things are going to have to be. And so to counter the idea of determinism, the Buddha started out by saying that there are gifts, meaning that people actually choose to give gifts and that the gifts really do have meaning, both for the donor and for the recipient.

In one way you could say that he staked his whole teaching on the connection between freedom and generosity. When people would come to ask him, "Where should a gift be given?" he would answer, "Wherever your mind feels inspired, wherever you feel it would be well used." In other words, generosity is free. No restrictions. No "you should give here, you shouldn't give there." In fact when monks are asked, "Where should this gift be given?" That's the response they are supposed to give: "Wherever your heart feels inspired; wherever you feel the gift would be well used."

In exercising that freedom, we create a sense of well-being in the mind. So it's a basic principle of our freedom and also a basic principle of the practice, how you take advantage of that freedom. Because when you give a gift that doesn't

harm yourself, doesn't harm other people, it is food for the mind, food for other good qualities in the mind.

This is why, when you look at the history of Buddhism across the centuries, you see that when people misunderstand the idea of generosity, the Dharma gets twisted as well. There is a series of texts called the Apadanas, the very last addition to the sutta section of the Pali Canon. It was obviously written at a time when monasteries were growing large and monks wanted donations. They did what they could to encourage people to be generous, more generous than if they were left to feel freely inspired to be generous. The monks promised huge rewards for generosity. "Give a little gift, and you're guaranteed to become an arahant at a time of a future Buddha. And in the meantime you're not going to experience any of the lower realms. You get to be king of the devas, queen of the devas. For many, many eons you get to be kings or queens on earth countless times. And after a good long joyride through samsara, when you've decided you've had enough, okay, then you're ready to become an arahant. And if you want to become a special arahant, well, it's going to cost you a little extra but it can be arranged." The going price to be an arahant with special distinctions was seven days worth of meals for the whole Sangha.

You can see what's happening here. The monks are beginning to take the teaching on generosity and twisting it to their own ends. And as generosity gets twisted, the teaching as a whole gets twisted as well. The eightfold path disappears into the background. The fact that you are generous in what they call the Buddha field, the field of the Buddha's potential for creating lots of meritorious rewards for a little tiny meritorious gift: That becomes the important thing. You do service to the Buddha and then awakening is guaranteed. So the eightfold path turns into a onefold path: generous service in the Buddha field.

Once generosity gets screwed into strange shapes like this, the Dharma gets screwed into strange shapes as well. So it's good not to overlook the basics. It's good to have a right understanding of what the basics are all about. That way you keep the rest of the practice in line. Generosity is a freely given gift where you feel inspired. The Buddha does note that some gifts give greater benefits than others, but it's up to you to decide what you want to give, where you want to give it. And the monks have lots of rules for how to behave as they receive gifts. They can't go out of the way to attract gifts to themselves that might otherwise go to other monks. When they've been given a gift, they can't turn around and give it back to lay people. They can share it among other monks, but they aren't supposed to take something given to them and give it to a layperson they're trying to please.

Sometimes we have a tendency to disregard the Vinaya, thinking well, it's just a bunch of rules from old times that may or may not be applicable now. But

a lot of the rules have to do with this: how to behave in an economy of gifts, in a culture of gifts. Because the principle of gift giving goes way back much earlier than the Buddha. Sometimes in those dana talks they say that dana is a 2500 year old tradition. Well it's not. It's a much older tradition than that. It goes back to the beginning of human society. Human society is based on gifts.

I read once that the very first book on anthropology was an analysis of gift giving in different societies. It focused on how much you can understand about a society by the way people give gifts, the gestures with which they give gifts, the expectations that surround gift-giving. It tells you a lot about how that society is organized. The same idea applies with the principles of the Buddha's teachings. He created a culture of gifts so that the practice of the Dharma can be surrounded by gift giving. This is because one of the good features about giving a gift is that it breaks down barriers. When you place a price on something, saying, "I'll do X for you in exchange for Y," that's creating a barrier. X is not going to happen until Y comes. But when you give a gift, it's like being part of a family. And it involves the same network of responsibilities and connections that you find in a family, which is a good environment for practicing the Dharma, teaching the Dharma.

The Buddha said at one point one of the ideal features of a Dharma teacher is not to expect material reward for the teaching. He never said that the Dharma is priceless. That's another misinformed phrase you hear a lot in dana talks. What he did say was that the teacher should not expect material reward. In other words, the teaching of Dharma should be a gift. When it's given as a gift, people receive it as a gift. If it's given as something you're expected to get payment for, people will expect something for their payment, and start making demands. Sometimes the demands may be subtle. When a teacher looks out across the audience and starts talking about things that the people don't like to hear, you can see it in their faces. And if the teacher is concerned about how much money is going to come from the Dharma talk, he's going to start avoiding things that are difficult to talk about, that people don't want to hear.

There have been periods in the history of Buddhism when monks would put fans in front of their faces so that they wouldn't read the reaction of the people out there, the idea being that the audience would be more likely to actually hear the genuine Dharma when the speaker isn't trying to read the audience and please them.

So this is another one of the arrangements that the Buddha created: the situation in which people who practice the Dharma can depend on gifts. They're supposed to live a frugal life. And the gifts are not contingent on teaching. That way the teaching can be free, and less likely to be distorted.

So gifts are freely given, but there are things incumbent on understanding the right relationship there. Once the gift is given, it's given. Those rules in the

Vinaya aren't designed only for the monks; they're also designed for the donors. When a gift is given, there is no expectation of services in return. This is a lesson that a lot of people not only here in the West have trouble understanding. It's something that constantly has to be reiterated back in Asia as well. As for the monks as recipients of the gifts, they have the responsibility to behave in a way that's deserving of gifts. Because, after all, they as individuals are benefiting from a larger system. And one of their responsibilities is to keep the system going. If they accept people's gifts but start behaving in ways that are uninspiring, that starts drying up the gifts for the other monks as well. And it breaks a sense of trust. Because that's what giving relies on—that you trust one another. This is probably one of the most important aspects of creating this culture of giving. The Dharma is a lot more likely to survive in an atmosphere of trust.

This is one of the ways we create a sense of well-being even before we sit down and close our eyes, trying to understand this culture of giving and to participate in it as we feel so motivated—because it does emphasize our freedom. That's the beginning of training the mind. We are free to train the mind. No requirements aside from the fact that we're suffering from aging, illness, and death can force us. But there are lots of people out there who choose not to practice. And the Buddha was wise enough to see that you can't force people to practice the Dharma. But you can invite them. And the best way to invite them is to practice the Dharma yourself so the results become apparent and other people get interested. In this way, the practice is done in the same spirit as giving a gift: You feel so motivated to do this.

So each time you sit down to meditate, you realize on the one hand that aging, illness and death are breathing down your neck, so you've got to do something. But on the other hand, as you think about it, you realize that this is a good thing to do. If you practice with a sense of being inspired to practice, the results are much more likely to come. Ajaan Chah is famous for saying that when you feel like practicing, you practice. When you don't feel like practicing, you practice. And how do you do that? If you look at yourself and you say, "I'm just not in the mood to practice," you have to think yourself into a position when you realize that deep down inside, yes, you really would prefer to practice, regardless of whatever vagrant moods are coming through the mind. So at least part of you feels inspired. Part of you realizes this is the way to freedom, by exercising your freedom to practice.

One of the things we're going to explore as we practice further is, "What is this element of freedom in the mind?" We do have this choice. What is it to make a choice? This is why we practice meditation is to understand the process of making a choice, to see our intentions. This is why we practice concentration to establish a firm intention of the mind and then watch it, to see what happens

when other intentions come in, and we make the choice to stick with our original intention, again and again and again. There is an element of freedom in there, and that's what we're trying to catch sight of, because it leads to a dimension of total freedom.

So in this way, the freedom that we're looking for that's free from suffering, totally free from any burdens for the mind, any restrictions for the mind at all, starts by exercising that freedom to give.

The Lotus in the Mud

January 5, 2009

One of the traditional images of the mind in concentration or of the awakened mind is of a lotus growing out of the mud. In the tropics the mud is pretty rank. And yet out of the mud you get this lovely flower with a very gentle smell and leaves that repel the water, flowers that repel the water, so that they can grow up in muddy water and yet when the flower opens, it's very white and pure.

The same with the mind. As it gets past its greed, anger, passion, aversion, and delusion, it can blossom. Or you can compare the lotus in the mud to the mind living in this body, which, as the chants said, is full of all kinds of unclean things, and yet the mind can be clean. The mind can be pure. In fact you can use the contemplation of the body as a means of purifying the mind—because the more you see that the body isn't yours, the more the mind stands out on its own.

So it's useful to contemplate the body. Sometimes it's forced on us like today: all that stuff that came out of the sewage pipe, where did that come from? Human bodies. Ajaan Fuang once had a pair of students—a husband and wife—who were interesting, in that they would tend to have very similar experiences in their meditation at the same time. And there was one period when they both got really disgusted with food. The wife had to work in the kitchen to feed the rest of the family, and so one day she was fixing a piece of liver, and a dog came into the kitchen and so she threw a little piece of liver to it. And the dog was so eager to get it. She watched the dog devour the liver, and she felt disgusted both by the liver and by the dog's eagerness to eat it. How could you take such disgusting stuff inside you? And it turns out that the husband was beginning to feel the same way about food.

So they came to a point where they really couldn't eat. They mentioned this to Ajaan Fuang, and he said, "Well, being unable to eat is not the purpose of the contemplation. After all, what do you have in your body? You've got a liver too. You've got a stomach too. You've got this stuff in your intestines. Your body's no different from the food. So in what way is the body too pure to eat this kind of thing?" When he said this, both of them were able to overcome their sense of disgust.

The purpose of the contemplation is not to get you so that you can't eat. But it is to get you to the point where you have a sense of dispassion. This body you've been carrying around and been so proud of and so protective of, and the

mind has so much invested in it: You've got to get to a point where you can step back from it, and say, "Oh, that's just the way the body is. It's not really worth holding onto." You use it as a tool. And the best use of the body is to use it in the practice. But beyond that you've got to question the mind's eager holding onto it. This way you can learn to let go of those concerns about the survival of the body. That lightens the mind a great deal.

But as Ajaan Lee was fond of pointing out, the filthiness of the body is nothing compared with the filthiness of the mind when it's not trained. The body's filth is just the nature of the body. It's not pretending to be anything that it isn't. But the mind filled with passion, aversion and delusion: that's really what you've got to cleanse away. Defilements, hindrances, all these forms of ignorance, and all the manifestations of ignorance in all of its different ways: Those are the things that really prevent the mind from being luminous, from being pure. So you've really got to work on those things. You've got to learn how to question whichever defilements you tend to invest in. Look at all the harm that they cause.

We don't like to look at this. As Upasika Kee often comments, these things we prefer not to see. We'd rather focus on how good and pure we are. But if we don't look at the other side, we're won't be able to cleanse it away. Like that pipe today, if we had just let it happen, let it stay the way it was, it'd continue to fester, and just get worse and worse and worse. So it's good to dig out those roots of unskillful behavior: greed, aversion, delusion. Try to get the mind as still and independent as you can in the present moment, so you can look back on the times when you've given in to these roots of unskillful behavior. Reflect on how much harm you've done to yourself, how much harm you've done to other people. That way you can value the opportunity to say No to those defilements, to call them into question, and see where you can uproot them. You can't just simply let go of these things by hiding the mind away in concentration. They will be quiet for a while, but they're still there, just like the roots in the septic system.

There's a tendency sometimes, when the mind does get quiet, that you just don't want to look at these things. You'd rather pretend that they're not there, that they're gone. And that attitude, of course, just allows them to fester. So when the mind does settle down and is still, learn to look at it and see where the seeds are that would make you still want to go after greed, aversion, or delusion. What kind of attitudes does the mind have that fosters these things, that likes to stay invested, likes to keep them around as pets?

This ability to question your old allegiances is an important part of the meditation, an important part of training the mind. This is why they say the lotus grows in the mud. You have to learn to look at your own defilements. You have to learn how to look at your own weak points—not so that you get down on yourself, but so that you learn how not to identify with those things. You say,

“Okay, they’ve been there in the mind, but they don’t have to be. I’ve sided with those things in the past, but I don’t have to in the future. I don’t have to right now.”

You have to understand their allure. We had a discussion awhile back in which someone was saying that the only pure Buddhist practice is just watching things arise and pass away. If you do any more analysis than that, you’re mixing in Western psychoanalysis, and that sullies the practice. But that was not what the Buddha said. He said that watching things arise and pass away was only part of liberating insight. You watch to see when there’s greed or no greed, aversion or no aversion, delusion and no delusion. You do this not as an end in and of itself, but so that you can notice what comes and goes along with them. You realize that they’re not necessarily part of the innate nature of the mind. They’re just events that come and go—but they come and go in patterns. The reason we latch onto them is because they have a certain allure. And as we all know, much of that allure is something we give to them. We paint them in nice colors. We like the way they look once they have been painted up to our taste.

As long as we keep painting them, we’re not going to let them go. So you have to see that the paint is illusory. It’s hiding what these things actually do to the mind. What this means is that you’ve got to see the drawbacks. These things really do cause harm. They wreak havoc in the mind. They wreak havoc in relations with other people. You can begin to compare the allure with the drawbacks, seeing that the gain is nowhere compensating for the cost, so that the mind gets more motivated to see the escape from these things.

That’s the mud that you have to go through. But by going through that mud and analyzing these things and understanding them is what gives rise to the discernment that can cleanse the mind. As the Buddha said, the mind is cleansed through discernment. It’s not cleansed through concentration. Concentration allows the discernment to do its work, gives it a place to stand, but the discernment is what makes all the difference.

There’s a tendency, however, to try to avoid this mud. As we get into concentration we want just to hang out in the concentration, thinking that we’ve found something pure. But the Buddha compares that attachment to concentration to a cesspool outside of a village of paupers. It’s just allowed to grow and grow and grow, all that stagnant water. It doesn’t get to flow away until you make a breakthrough through ignorance. Only when you’ve made that breakthrough can it all flow away.

The concentrated mind that just allows the defilements to stay there—it doesn’t want to touch them, it doesn’t want to deal with them: That’s the cesspool. For discernment to grow, it has to grow out of all that mud. Only that can purify the mind and lead to awakening.

So use the concentration to get the mind in a position where it's willing to look at its own drawbacks, instead of focusing on things outside. Ajaan Maha Boowa makes a comment about how we have a tendency, if there's mud in our minds, to sling it around on other people: "There's something wrong with this person or that person, the teacher is no good, my fellow Dharma practitioners are no good." The mud gets slung around. But you have to see, where does it come from? It actually comes from inside. Learn how to turn around and look at it, and see what's really there. It really is mud. But as you learn how to analyze it and see it for what it is, the mind gets clearer and clearer. This is the nourishment for the lotus.

Concentration is here as a tool. It's not an end in and of itself. This can be discouraging when you're having trouble getting into concentration, but it's good to be forewarned anyhow. When the concentration comes after a lot of difficulty, you tend to really hang onto it. And as long as you're hanging on for the purpose of developing it as a tool, that's perfectly fine. There will come the point, though, where you have to start turning around and doing more work. The concentration isn't the lotus. It's food for the lotus. It's there to give you the energy, the solid foundation needed to get the work done, so that the actual lotus can bloom.

Balancing Tranquility & Insight

January 12, 2009

For some people, the practice of meditation involves two very different kinds of activities. One is getting the mind to be still, and the other is giving rise to insight. And for them, these are very sharply divided. In order to get the mind still, you simply just force it to stay with one thing and don't allow it to think at all. Then when it's rested, then you allow it to do some thinking. Give it a specific topic to deal with, like the 32 parts of the body, the problem of pain, whatever happens to come up in the mind as a specific problem. You analyze it and deal with it. After a while, you find that your analysis starts getting fuzzy or blunt. It's like using a sharp knife. You use it to cut things, and cut things, and cut things, and finally you find you can't cut through things anymore. That's when you've got to get the mind to stop, be still again. And the stilling is what sharpens the blade so that it's ready to come out and do some more cutting.

For other people though, the development of insight and tranquility is something that happens together. This is specifically true of the way the Buddha teaches breath meditation, because he defines tranquility as a matter of getting the mind to settle down, whereas insight is a matter of learning to see things in terms of fabrication: how they get put together, what the processes are, and how to develop a sense of dispassion toward them. And it only stands to reason that as you develop a sense of dispassion, the mind is going to get more still. And the more still you are, the more clearly you will see things in these terms, if you're looking for them in these terms. That's what breath meditation is all about.

Of the four tetrads in breath meditation, the first tetrad corresponds to the body and the second one corresponds to feelings. The third corresponds to mind, or intent—the word *citta* here can also mean intent. And then finally the dhammas or mental qualities is the fourth. In each case, you're sensitizing yourself to some aspect of fabrication. In the first tetrad, the fabrication is the in-and-out breath itself. You sensitize yourself to when the breath is short, when it's relatively long. The text only says that much, but what you're actually doing is learning how to notice how short breathing affects the body, how long breathing affects the body. On the other hand, you also become sensitive to how the state of the body affects the way you breathe.

Then the Buddha has you get sensitive to the entire body, after which he tells you to calm bodily fabrication, that's the fourth step in the tetrad. What this means is to calm the effect of the breath on the body. The breath calms down, the

intentional element of the breath calms down as well. This can involve a lot of things. It can actually get to the point where the breath stops. In the course of this, you begin to gain some insight into how much intentional element there is in the breathing.

I've had a lot of people who've practiced mindfulness methods where they were told simply to let the breath do its own thing. And then they come to the Ajaan Lee method, where he actually tells him to adjust the breath, play with the breath, work to get it comfortable. At first, they resist. But after a while, as they actually try the method, they become more and more sensitive to the element of intention in the breathing, and they begin to realize that even when they thought they were allowing the breath to do its own thing, they were actually manipulating it unconsciously. They'd been taught to overlook the extent to which they were already fabricating the breath.

So an important part of the meditation is to sensitize yourself to how much you are shaping things so that then you can actually let that process of shaping things calm down to a level you might not have imagined before. In the case of the breath, this means calming the breath to the point where all the breath energies in the body seem to connect up, and you're getting enough oxygen through the pores of your skin so you don't need to do any in and out breathing. And right there you've gained some insight into the process of fabrication at the same time that the mind is beginning to calm down. This is how tranquility and insight develop together using the body as your frame of reference.

You learn many of the same lessons in terms of feelings in the second tetrad. The Buddha starts out by telling you to be sensitive to rapture, sensitive to pleasure. And those feelings can be based on lots of different things: the sense of well-being that comes from developing virtue, developing generosity; the sense of confidence that arises from contemplating the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha; or recollecting on your own past virtues, your own past acts of generosity, and, as they say, the qualities of the devas that you've been developing, which include generosity and restraint. When you think about these things, you develop a sense of confidence. You're not just a weight on the world. And you're also worthy of doing this practice.

So sometimes those thoughts can give rise to a sense of pleasure that then can become the basis of concentration. Once you allow yourself to be sensitive to the pleasure and the rapture, then the Buddha tells you to be sensitive to the effect that these are having on the mind—not only the feelings, but also the perceptions that go along with them. These shape the mind. These are mental fabrications. And as you notice that, you allow them to calm down. For instance, if the rapture feels too intense, you allow it to calm down. You tune in to an area of your awareness that's more refined than the rapture.

When the pleasure seems superfluous, and you simply want to settle in and be very, very still, you get the mind to a state of equanimity. What you are doing is allowing the mental fabrication of feeling to calm down. At the same time, you allow your perceptions to calm down, and this can actually take you deeper into the formless jhanas. If you see that holding onto the perception of the shape of the body is a burden on the mind, you can drop that. You're left with space: the space inside the body, the space outside the body. It all connects. It has no boundary.

From that you become aware of the awareness of space, and that changes your perception from "space" to "knowing." The mental fabrication—the effect of the perception on the mind—gets more and more refined: just knowing, knowing, knowing. Then even the oneness of that knowing begins to seem burdensome. So you drop that. And you're left with the perception of the dimension of nothingness. You can pursue this all the way up through the formless jhanas, as you allow mental fabrication to calm down.

So what you're doing is that you're developing tranquility and insight at the same time. The mind gets more still, and as things calm down, you gain more and more insight into this process of fabrication.

The same principle applies to the third tetrad, when you're directly aware of the mind. Again, the tetrad starts out by telling you to be sensitive to that aspect of your awareness. Here "mind" can also mean "intent," the intent you have to stay with the breath. You're clear on that. You're clear on the state of your mind, the state of your awareness. And then you see what it needs. Does it need to be gladdened? Does it need more energy? You think about things that give it gladness, like the recollections. Or by adjusting the breath, or by adjusting your perceptions of the breath, the perceptions of what you're focusing on.

Then you allow the mind to get more and more steady. What perceptions allow it to get more steady? Perception of the breath as a whole body process gets it more steady. Your perception that you're not separate from the breath, that you're not in one part of the body or inhabiting one part of the body and watching the breath in some other part of the body, but you're actually one with the breath, immersed in the breath, bathed in the breath, surrounded by breath: That perception helps steady the mind even further.

Then you check to see how you can release the mind. This begins with releasing it from thoughts of sensuality and all the other hindrances that eat away at your meditation. Once you've released it from them, you find yourself in the different levels of jhana. And you begin to release yourself from the coarser levels to the more refined ones. Or you can release yourself from the activity of intending concentration and get ultimate release. So the mind gets more and more still at the same time you're getting hands-on experience with the process of

fabrication, seeing how much intention shapes your awareness, and how you can change your intentions and see how that creates different levels of gladness, steadiness, and release in your awareness. So here again, tranquility and insight go together.

The same principle applies to the fourth foundation. You start out being aware of impermanence or inconstancy. In the early stages of the meditation, this means focusing on the inconstancy of anything that would pull you away from your concentration, so that you can develop a sense of dispassion for whatever it is: all the stories we bring with us; all the concerns we bring with us that tend to pop up as we try to get the mind to settle down. We have a whole hour, and part of the mind says, "Let's think about this. "You suddenly find yourself planning next month, or regurgitating events of last month or whatever. You've got to realize that those things are impermanent, stressful, and not-self. There is really no meat there for you there, no nourishment.

As Ajaan Lee says, it's like a dog chewing on a bone. There's no meat left on the bone, so all it tastes is the taste of its own saliva. Or, he says, it's like licking the bottom of yesterday's soup pot when there's no soup left. That's thinking about the past. Or licking tomorrow's soup pot where there's no soup in it yet. That's thinking about the future. There's no nourishment there at all.

So as you learn to see the impermanence of these thoughts, it develops a sense of dispassion. And because you are feeling dispassionate for them, you are no longer involved in their creation, so they stop.

It's important to understand that relationship between dispassion and cessation. Dispassion means being dispassionate toward the activities that you're doing, the things that you're creating. Once you feel dispassion, you don't feel the need to create them anymore and they stop. If your insight goes deep enough, you can actually end that particular activity, that particular defilement. As the Buddha says, you relinquish it. You give it back. Whatever you are laying claim to, you just give it back. Ajaan Lee's term is spitting it out. Something you've taken into your mouth and you realize you don't want it anymore, you spit it back out.

As I said at the beginning, this applies at the beginning to all the topics that would pull you away from your concentration. As your concentration begins to develop, and you get more and more sensitive, it starts applying to the concentration itself. You see the inconstancy of one level of concentration, and once you let go of whatever inconstancy you can detect in it, that takes you to a deeper level, then a deeper level, until finally you can abandon your attachment to concentration altogether. That's when the dispassion is total, the cessation is total, and the relinquishment is total. You even give up the whole path.

So in following the steps of breath meditation, you're developing concentration by developing tranquility and insight at the same time. You're getting the mind to settle down at the same time you're learning how to look at fabrications and regard fabrications in a way that gives rise to dispassion. As the Buddha said, to gain good strong concentration, to attain the jhanas, requires that you develop both tranquility and insight.

Once the concentration has gotten solid, if you want to gain total release, again, use the concentration, use the jhana as a basis for deeper tranquility and deeper insight. In this way they all go together. And as for the question of how you balance them, as Ajaan Lee says, when you're working with the breath, you find that you'll sometimes be stressing the tranquility side more, and sometimes the insight side more. But there's always some insight in your tranquility. There's always some tranquility in your insight. It's just a question of which side you're going to stress more at any one particular time, which the mind seems to need more. That involves learning how to read your mind, that third tetrad. Does it need more gladdening? Does it need more release? Does it need more steadying?

But as you get more and more sensitive in how you read your mind, read the processes of fabrication—either in terms of body, or feelings, mind, mental qualities—learning how to develop that balance, that's an important part of insight as well. You see when you need to let go of certain things, and which things you need to hang on to in the mean time. You don't want to be the sort of person who has a few moments of concentration and lets them go, saying, "Okay, I've gotten beyond concentration now." That goes nowhere. It short-circuits the whole path. You need to use fabrication to get to the end of fabrication. Seeing that is an important element of insight right there.

And as your skill develops in developing both tranquility and insight, the whole path comes together. Even for people for whom insight practice and tranquility practice are two radically separate things, they find that as the path begins to reach fruition, everything comes together. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how at that point, it's hard to draw a line between insight practice and tranquility practice. They both reach balance.

So you can't determine ahead of time which sort of person you're going to be, the sort with two radically separate practices, or the sort with a more integrated practice from the very beginning. But the integration is where we're all headed. And it's a matter of learning how to read your own mind, to figure out how the balance is going to be developed. Think of those old-fashioned balances. They don't always stay in balance. Sometimes they have to swing back and forth before balance is reached. The same with the mind: Sometimes it starts out in a balanced state that it can maintain steadily, other times it swings widely from one side to the other before the balance finally settles down to its balance

point. But the balance point is where we're all headed.

Success on the Path

January 13, 2009

To stay with the breath, you first have to *want* to stay with the breath. It's the first basis of success in the practice. Some people object to the idea that there's success and failure in the practice. But this is a path that leads to a goal. That's something we always should keep in mind: that we're going someplace. Willy-nilly, we're going someplace. We're heading to aging, illness and death—but you want to ask yourself, is that the place you want to head? Or the only place you want to head? The body does have to age, grow ill and die, but does the mind have to do that? Does the mind have to suffer from those things? Is there a place where you can go where you don't suffer from those things? As the Buddha said, it's not found by going anywhere in the physical universe. But it is found by going inside.

And the fact that there is that possibility, that potential for going in a direction that doesn't age, doesn't ill, doesn't die: that's why we have the Buddha's path. That's why there are the right factors of the path, and the wrong factors of the path. And that's why there's success and failure. If it were the case that there wasn't that potential for putting an end to suffering, that life was simply a matter of learning how to accept what's already here, then the practice would be very different.

But what the Buddha is asking you to do is to accept something else, that there is a potential to put an end to suffering. And it's going to demand a lot out of you. There is one place where he says that even if the practice involves suffering to the point where there are tears streaming down your cheeks, you stick with it, because the path ultimately does lead to a goal that more than makes up for all the tears. The few tears running down your cheeks are very few compared to all the tears you've been shedding already. If you drive up Interstate 5 along the coast and look out across the Pacific Ocean, you realize that there's a huge amount of water there. It stretches out to the horizon, and you know it goes far beyond that. And yet the amount you see is nothing compared to all the water in all the oceans, and all the water in all the oceans is nothing compared to the volume of the tears you've been shedding over all these many lifetimes. If you don't follow the path, there are probably going to be that many more tears waiting for you in the future.

So there are two reasons to have the desire to focus on the path. One is realizing that the path leads you away from a lot of suffering. There are many

comparisons in the Canon. The Buddha picked up a little bit of dirt under his fingernail one time and said, which is greater, the dirt under my fingernail, or the dirt in the earth? Of course, the dirt in the earth was much greater. He said, in the same way, for someone who has seen the Dharma, has broken through the experience of the Dharma Eye—in other words gained the first level of awakening—the amount of suffering that remains for that person is like the dirt under the fingernail, whereas the amount of suffering that awaits those who haven't is like the dirt in all the earth. So that's one reason for following the path, is that it's a way to avoid an awful lot of suffering.

The other reason for engendering desire for the path is that it's a good path and it leads to a really good destination. The destination is something we can't see yet, but we can see the path. Right View, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration: These are all good things to do. The Buddha is not asking you to do anything that you'd be ashamed of, not asking you to do anything that's going to be harmful to anybody. He's asking you to develop good, honest, upright qualities of the mind, things you can be proud that you can develop.

So as you think about the rewards of the practice, and all the dangers that the practice takes you away from, it can help give energy to your practice. This is why recollection of the Dharma is one of the recollections the Buddha recommends. He says that when you're focusing on one of the frames of reference, or establishing mindfulness based on the body, feelings, mind, mental qualities, there may come times when the practice starts getting difficult. As he says, there may be a fever in the body, or a fever in the mind. That, he says, is when it's good to put that topic aside and think about something inspiring. And the practices he recommends that are inspiring are recollection of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha; recollection of your own generosity, virtue; recollection of the qualities of the devas, thinking about the fact that you've been developing those qualities as well. And you think about those themes as much as you need to get rid of that fever in the body and the fever in the mind, to get the mind feeling inspired and uplifted.

In this way you develop the desire to get back on the path. It's not that these recollections are off the path, but they're supplementary reflections. They can get you back into the practice of Right Mindfulness, Right Effort, and on into Right Concentration.

When things start getting dry, remember that it's wise to gladden the mind to give rise to that sense of desire. It's part of learning how to read your own mind, to diagnose its diseases, and then provide the medicine it needs. If that the desire is lacking, stop and think: What would your life be like if there were no prospect of putting an end to suffering? Think of how fortunate we are that we

have the path, that it hasn't been forgotten. We don't have to forge the path ourselves in a very uncertain world.

Think about the Buddha, about how uncertain things were at his time. A lot of people were saying that there was no way to put an end to suffering, that you should just accept things as they are. Others were saying that there was an end to suffering, but nothing you could do about it. It was just going to happen naturally, just like a ball of string unwinding and eventually you'd get to the end of the string. But in the meantime, you've got to put up with all the suffering that's entailed in what remains of the string. The Buddha had the courage not to accept either of those ideas. He thought, Maybe there is something that can be accomplished through human effort. And so he put his life on the line to test that idea. At present we have the example of many people in the past, the Buddha himself and all of his Noble Disciples. So it's not quite so uncertain. We may still have our doubts about it, but at least there's a path laid out. And a lot of very honest and upright people have said that it works.

When the practice gets dry, it's useful to think about these things, so that you can work through any hesitation you may have in focusing on the breath or any reluctance, any sense of weariness. As Ajaan Fuang said, you lubricate the mind so that it doesn't seize up the way an engine would seize up when it runs out of lubricant. You give rise to the desire to stick with the path. From that desire develops persistence: the energy, the stick-to-it-iveness that's required in training the mind. After all, the mind has a lot of old habits. And it's going to take time and persistence to deal with these things.

So it's important to learn how to give yourself energy all along the way. Persistence as Ajaan Lee says, goes together with your powers of endurance. And the best way is to keep yourself on the path, keep yourself strong on the path, is not to weigh yourself down with unnecessary doubts about yourself, unnecessary complaints about how difficult things are. It's always good to focus on where things are going well, and not to keep obsessing about the things that are difficult or wearisome. We may distrust the Pollyanna approach of always looking for the bright side, but it makes the practice a lot lighter to keep reminding yourself that there are a lot of positive things about being on this path. And you find that they give you energy. You can save your doubts for your defilements. Learn how to be skeptical about your defilements. In other words, you really look at them and question the assumptions that get in the way of the practice.

Of course that means you have to learn how to recognize them. This is where the quality of *citta* or intent interest comes in. As you give yourself to the practice, look to see what keeps pulling you back: What nagging doubts do you have? What complaints does the mind have? Learn to question them. This is where *citta* merges in with *vimansa*, your powers of analysis, your powers of

discrimination, your ability to question the thoughts that come into your mind. You can ask yourself, Exactly where does that thought come from? Can you identify the person who in your past would think in that way? Can you identify the tone of the voice that thinks in that way? Is it a tone of voice that you want to adopt? And you can look at that thought in terms of the issue of freedom. Do you want to be a slave to that kind of thinking?

This is one of the reasons we try to keep the mind with the breath: so that it can look at its thoughts with a certain of detachment, from a certain amount of distance, get some perspective on them. One really effective way of dealing with them is to refuse to go along with them and see how they complain. Then ask them, “Why should I believe that complaint?” And try to see what kind of reasons that part of the mind comes up with. Keep pushing your questioning until you find the point where the reasons break down.

When you can develop these four bases for success, you’re in a position where you can be your own teacher, read the situation in the mind and not fall for it. Or to use another analogy, you’re your own doctor. Learn to recognize the illness, and recognize the cause of the illness, and give the right medicine—because as the Buddha said, he merely points out the way. It’s up to you to follow it. As a doctor, he is the one who prescribe the medicine. It’s for you to find the various herbs that he prescribes and then to take the medicine. The Buddha can’t give you a shot and cure your illness. But he can tell you what the right herbs are and how you take them. And he gives you some explanation of the cause of the illness so you can understand how the herbs are related to the cause. In other words, he teaches you how to become your own doctor.

So try to develop this sense of what’s needed to be your own doctor, to be your own teacher, so that at the very least, the dialogue in your mind can be more helpful, more intelligent, more wise, and actually head in that direction that we want to go—to the end of suffering. At the very least, test to see if what the Buddha had to say is true. The only way you’re going to know is if you give it a good honest serious test. If you don’t give it that test, then all the sufferings of life begin to move in on you. They don’t promise a way out at all. The denial of any way out: that’s what’s so insistent about the way life normally is. And that defilements that go along with that denial are what keep us trapped.

So we owe it to our desire for happiness to give the path a serious try. And to try to develop whatever qualities are needed to see us through.

Inconstancy

January 16, 2009

One of the basic principles of insight or clear seeing is that all compounded or all fabricated things are inconstant. They don't last. They waiver. They change. And as someone once said, So what else is new? Things change. And if that's all there was to the Buddha's insight, there wouldn't be much to it. But it goes deeper than that. It's not just that things change, but that things change in line with their conditions. And you want to be able to see that changing in line with their conditions—in other words, to see that this arises when that arises, this ceases when that ceases.

Even that's not much of an insight until you realize that we're also trying to feed in those areas where things arise and pass away. We're looking for our happiness there. And if we look for happiness in these things in and of themselves, we're going to be disappointed. And if we can't figure out the pattern, we are going to be neurotic.

I once read about a test they ran on some pigeons. They put each of them in a box and in each box there was a green lever and a red lever. In some of the boxes, when you pushed the green lever, you'd get food; and sometimes when you pushed it, you wouldn't get food. Sometimes when you pushed the red lever, you'd get food and sometimes you wouldn't. Then they compared the birds in these boxes with another set of birds placed in boxes where the levels behaved in a predictable way: When you pushed the green level, you'd food; when you pushed the red level, you wouldn't. The birds in the second set of boxes were perfectly normal. The birds in the first set of boxes went crazy and began behaving in very neurotic ways—for two reasons. One was the only way they were going to get food was by pressing levers. And yet, two, they couldn't figure out when a lever was going to work and when it wasn't. That drove them to distraction.

So as long as we're looking for food in things that arise and pass away, we've got to learn the pattern of how we're going to get good food for the mind from these arising-and-passing-away things. This is part of the Buddha's other insight into inconstancy: that even though some things arise and pass away and can't give an ultimate happiness in and of themselves, they do function as a path to the ultimate happiness, whereas other things don't. This is the pattern. The things that can function as a path to true happiness are skillful. Those that don't are unskillful. An important part of insight is learning, through observation, which

is which.

So we look for inconstancy not just to see how things arise and pass away, but how we can learn how to manipulate the process so we can actually find the food that we want, and ultimately, of course, get to the point where we don't need food anymore. But the only way you get to that point is by feeding on the right things. This is why we meditate.

When you start out meditating, and you see that states in your mind are arising and passing away, you're already dealing in what's called the frame of reference of mental qualities in and of themselves. Even though your focus is on the breath, you can't help but notice that there are times when the mind is concentrated on the breath and times when it's not. You've got to learn how to figure out both sides of the question: which things are helping to foster concentration, and which things are getting in the way of concentration. And you have to learn how to encourage the first sort of conditions, and get rid of the second.

So even though we're focusing on the breath as our primary frame of reference, there's this other frame of reference going on at the same time. You have to learn how to recognize which qualities are hindrances and which are the factors for awakening. The hindrances are the primary set of unskillful qualities; the factors for awakening are the primary skillful ones. In fact, the factors of awakening are the ones that get you started on this path to begin with, for they help you in sorting all of these things out.

The factors for awakening begin with mindfulness. Once you're mindful of the breath, for instance, you begin to see that there are skillful and unskillful qualities arising in the mind and that you've got to learn how to distinguish them. That's called analysis of qualities, the second factor for awakening. Then you foster the effort to do away with the unskillful ones and to encourage the skillful ones, which is the third factor for awakening: persistence. So right there you've got the first three of the factors for awakening. You want to encourage that ability to observe your mind, because even though you're trying to stay with the breath, or trying to stay focused on the breath, you're not going to be able to do it unless you've got these other faculties helping you along. As Ajaan Lee explains it, analysis of qualities is directly connected with directed thought and evaluation, which are factors of jhana. Those are things you need to help you get into the meditation, to get solidly with the breath.

So you're dealing with two different frames of reference right there: the body in and of itself and these mental qualities in and of themselves. So when any of the hindrances arise—sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, or uncertainty—your first duty is simply to recognize them for what they are, to see that they are hindrances and they deserve to be let go. That right there

is quite an accomplishment because for the most part, when a hindrance arises, we're already with it. We're on its side.

For example, when sensual desire comes along, we see it as a good thing. We've got decades of Western psychology to prove that sensual desire can't be thwarted. If you thwart it, it turns into The Thing and goes underground. At least that's what the mind tells itself when it decides it's going to go along with the desire. There are all kinds of reasons the mind can produce for its actions, but you've got to learn how to look past them and ask yourself, "What does this desire actually do to the mind?" This is not just a matter of watching it arise and pass away. You've got to see, when it arises, what does it bring along with it? What does it do? When it passes away, what's it like? And you begin to realize when it's present it really does cloud up the mind. It creates a lot of disturbance, a lot of stress, makes it impossible to stay with the breath. And you've got to decide whether you're on the side of the sensual desire or on the side of the breath.

The same goes with ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty and doubt. You've got to decide whether you're on their side or on the side of the breath. And the best way to decide is just to watch these things, step back from them. Ask yourself, when they come, what comes along with them? When they go away, what goes away with them? And when they come, why do they come? What intentions underlie them? Can you trust those intentions?

At this stage in the practice, this is how you use the principle of inconstancy: not just watching things arise and pass away, arise and pass away—because, after all, you're trying to feed in these areas, so you want to find good food for yourself. What kind of food do the hindrances provide? If they give you bad food, poisonous food, spoiled food, what can you do to clear them out of the mind? So you're not engaged in just a passive watching. You watch with a purpose. You want to get past these things.

A similar principle applies to the factors for awakening. Once you've analyzed things and seen what's skillful and unskillful, you've got to figure out why it is that the skillful qualities arise; when they're there, how you protect them, how you maintain them—in Ajaan Fuang's words, how you "*prakhawng*" them. The Thai word *prakhawng* means that you nurture them along, protect them, support them.

So even though you know that they're inconstant, you try to use the principle of inconstancy—i.e., seeing that they depend on causes and conditions—in order to nurture those conditions because you know you're going to depend on them. These qualities are going to be your food on the path, the good kind of food that strengthens the mind.

The Buddha compares the states of jhana to different kinds of food. You're off in a fortress at the edge of a frontier. The enemy is all around you, but you've got food in the fortress, so even though the enemy is laying siege, you still can stay well fed, strong, and keep up the fight. You've got water, rice, sesame seeds, all sorts of good food, all the way up to the fourth jhana, which is compared to butter, ghee, sugar, and honey.

And because these things are good food, you don't just watch them arise and pass away. You do what you can to grow the food and then to keep the food because without it, the practice dies. Only when you've used that food to strengthen your concentration, strengthen your insight, strengthen the tranquility of the mind can you get to the point where you've fully mastered that process of cause and effect. That's when you turn to look at it and see, "How far does it take me?" It's brought you a long way, but it can take you only so far. You're not yet at the other shore. That's when you start looking at everything in terms of arising and passing away, and try to develop the dispassion that comes from not wanting to eat any of these things, even good food, anymore. The Buddha uses the word *nibbida*, which means disenchantment but also disgust, distaste. You've had enough of that food. That's when you can let go of everything. That's when there's final release.

This is the stage where you treat all compounded things in the same way, whether they're obstacles or part of the path, because you don't need to feed anymore. The mind doesn't have any hunger. But as long as it still does have hunger, your relationship to inconstancy is going to be different. You want to be like those healthy well-adjusted pigeons, knowing which lever gives food and which lever gives no food, or which lever gives good food and which lever gives bad. When you figure it out, you can really nurture yourself, really nourish yourself. Then the mind stays strong.

So there are many stages in this understanding of inconstancy. Not just, "Oh, I saw concentration last night and I saw that it was inconstant, so I let it go and that was that. What's next?" That kind of insight goes nowhere. The insight that does go somewhere is the insight that sees, "Oh, when this arises, it arises because of this. When it passes away, it passes away because of that." And if the "this" is a skillful quality, you want to nurture it. If it's an unskillful quality, you want to figure out the principle of cause and effect so you can stay away, let these things go. Because you still need to feed properly. You've got to take care of yourself. You still have those four duties with regard to the four noble truths. The path is to be developed. Suffering is to be comprehended. The causes of suffering are to be abandoned, so that the cessation of suffering can be realized. So for the time being, you use the principle of inconstancy to figure out what are the causes for the path, and how you keep them going, even though they are inconstant.

It's only when you get to the end of the path that the duties change. Ajaan Mun makes an interesting point. He says, there comes a point in the meditation where all four noble truths are one. What he means is they all come to have the same duty, whether it's stress or the path or whatever. It's all compounded. It's all inconstant. It's all to be abandoned.

But as you practice you need to know where you are in the practice and what the duties appropriate to that stage in the practice are. That's how you use insight into inconstancy with wisdom and discernment, so the teaching fulfills its intended purpose.

The Will to Awaken

January 22, 2009

There's a passage where the Buddha describes his knowledge of the fate of other people, or the destinations of other people. He says it's like watching a man walking along a path that doesn't fork off in any other direction. It goes straight to one destination. And the Buddha notes that if the man continues to follow that path, he's going to end up at that destination. Notice: It's contingent on the man's continuing on that path. After all, he might choose not to follow that path. He might change his mind, turn around.

There's another passage where the Buddha is asked, "Is the whole world going to release? Half the world? A third?" And he refuses to answer. Ananda, who's afraid that the man who asked the question is going to get upset, takes the man aside and says, "It's like a gatekeeper to a fortress. There's only one gate to the fortress. The gatekeeper walks around the fortress and he doesn't see even the slightest opening in the fortress wall, not even one big enough for a cat to slip through. So he comes to the conclusion—he doesn't know how many people are going to come in to the fortress, how many people will leave the fortress—but he does know that if they're going to come in or leave, they have to go through the gate. Again, the point here is that we have the choice to go into the gate or not go into the gate. It's up to us. It's a free choice. It's not imposed on us by our nature. We have to will it.

To get on the path to Awakening, you have to desire it. It's an act of will. It's a truth of the will. William James talks about two kinds of truths: truths of the observer and truths of the will. A truth of the observer is the type where you see cause and effect that are totally independent of your desire for them to be in a certain way: knowledge about astronomy, say, or about the laws of nature. You have to take your desire out of the equation if you're going to see these truths. You have to be, as much as possible, a non-interfering observer. You interfere a little bit here and there in order to test cause and effect, to see exactly what cause is connected to what effect, but you have to accept the results whether you like them or not. If your likes get in the way, you're not really going to see those truths.

Truths of the will, however, are a different matter entirely. You have to want them to be true in order for them to become true. If you're going to become a good pianist, a good carpenter, you have to *want* those things in order for them to happen. It helps if you have some natural inclination in that direction or some

natural talents. But to be really good, you have to have a strong desire. Without that desire, they're not going to happen. In this case, your likes and dislikes are important. They're actually a part of the truth.

This is the way it is with the path. We're not here just simply watching things passively. What we're learning is not a truth of the observer, it's a truth of the will. Awakening is something that has to be pursued. The deathless, of course, is not created by your desire. But the path is. It's something fabricated.

When you look at the qualities that lead to awakening—things like the ten perfections—they come under the headings of what the Buddha talks of as the *adhitthana dhamma*, things that are willed. There are actually four: discernment, truth, relinquishment, and peace or calming. All of these are things that we have to will in order to find them.

Now the problem with will of course is it can be blind, which is why discernment comes first. You want to will discernment for it to happen. It's not a question of whether you're born smart or not smart. It comes from developing two qualities. One is having conviction. Again this is where that issue of the truth of the will comes in. You have to be convinced that this is a worthwhile activity: trying to develop your discernment, trying to find awakening. You have to be convinced that it's possible. If you don't believe it's possible, it's not going to happen. It's like the person stuck in the woods. If you don't believe that there's a path out of the woods, you're not going to try to look for it. If you don't try to look for it, you're not going to find it.

So conviction that your actions really do make a difference, conviction that the Buddha really did gain awakening: these are an important part of discernment. The five strengths that end in discernment begin with conviction. As one of the ajaans in Thailand once said, it's not the case that discernment begins with perceptions or ideas or concepts. It begins with conviction, that there is a way out, and that it can be found through your own actions.

The other aspect of discernment is that you see what the important questions are. As the Buddha said, the big question is seeing where there's suffering, where there's stress, what's causing it, and what actions put an end to it. Those are the important questions in life. When you learn how to focus on those, it cuts through a lot of garbage. And then when you look at what qualities need to be developed in order to put an end to suffering, you find that they're also qualities required to improve your discernment. You need to develop more mindfulness, more alertness, more concentration. And part of that quest for the end of suffering involves goodwill—goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the people around you—because you realize that if your happiness depends on their suffering, it's not going to happen. They're going to try to block it or undo it. So you have to find a happiness that's harmless to everybody.

So that's the first thing you will: the will to discernment. It helps you see what goal is a good goal, and also what is clearly a good way to attain that goal. You're going to have to learn a lot of this path on your own as you go along. It's something you discover. All too often we read a book saying what it's going to be like: You're going to gain this insight, and then that insight. The problem is, when you've read those descriptions, you can force the mind in such a position that it starts having those insights. But that doesn't necessarily mean that they're true, that they're genuine insights. You have to learn how to be more observant on your own, more alert, to see what insights actually bring freedom from suffering. This means you have to look all around you, and all around your insights.

As Ajaan Lee once said, when you gain an insight, you have to turn it over to see to what extent it really is true, to what extent it's false, to what extent the opposite would be true. Only then can you know that you're not just programming yourself or trying to clone what you've read. Again that would be a case of trying to make your discernment grow from your concepts, as opposed to the conviction there's got to be a way out. You've got to find that way for yourself, with the Buddha's directions of course, but it's based on your own powers of mindfulness and alertness so you catch yourself to make sure that your defilements don't get in the way. So that's how we will discernment.

The next thing we will is truthfulness. Part of truthfulness is the quality of self-honesty. As the Buddha said, "Let a person come who is honest and no deceiver, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma." This is the first prerequisite for getting on the path: to be truthful. This doesn't mean just telling the truth, but also means deciding which you've got to do and sticking with it, being true to your intentions. This is where the precepts or virtue as a perfection comes in. Once you've realized that you don't want to harm anybody, you've got to follow through and really abstain from activities that are harmful, whether it's easy to abstain or not. Discernment helps here, in its practical mode. When you find that a precept goes against your desires, you've got to use your discernment to find ways of making yourself want to stick with it, making it easier to stick with it, learning to cast a jaundiced eye on your desires, realizing that they promise all kinds of things, but can you really trust them? You use your discernment to stay true to your intention and to find skillful ways of taking the wind out of the sails of your unskillful desires. That way you can hang on to what you know is really in your best interests, and in the best interests of the people around you.

The third thing that we have to will is relinquishment, learning how to let go. This is where the perfections of renunciation and giving come in. Giving here means giving away not only material things, but also our unskillful desires, giving up our unskillful ways of holding onto things. Sometimes it comes

naturally, easily, and sometimes it doesn't. And again this is where you need to use your discernment, learning strategies to make you more and more inclined to give up things you have to give up, things that get in the way, the lesser pleasures that get in the way of greater happiness.

This is not a matter of just giving up things that are obviously unskillful. I did a survey once on the topic of relinquishment in books of American Buddhism. In the few cases where they actually talk about relinquishment, they focus on relinquishing unhealthy relationships and relinquishing your controlling mindset. We don't really need the Buddha tell you relinquish those things. Your parents can tell you to relinquish unhealthy relationships. If you have a psychotherapist, the therapist will tell you to relinquish your controlling mindset. There are a lot of things that are really pleasurable, that society actually encourages you to look for, But the Buddha says, look, you've got to give them up as they lead to unhealthy attachments down the line. Your attachment to sensual pleasures and sensual desires: that's the big one. Your attachment to thoughts about, plans about sensual pleasures. That's what you have to learn how to renounce.

An important step is learning to see the rewards of renunciation. It's not going to leave you deprived. It really is restful to the mind. It really gives peace to the mind. There's a famous story about the monk, a former king, sitting in the forest exclaiming, "What bliss! What bliss!" And it turns out he's not pining after the joys he felt when he was a king before he became a monk. He's exclaiming over how blissful he is now that he can sit under the tree without having to worry about all the people who wanted to kill him when he was a king, all the people who wanted to take away his pleasures and wealth. That's one of the pleasures of renunciation, that sense of freedom, and nobody's going to try to steal that from you. And as the monk said to the Buddha, his mind was now like a wild deer: It was free. You've got to learn how to think in those ways when the desire for sensuality really gets strong, to see that when you can renounce it, you're free.

And again you have to will that. It doesn't come naturally. As the Buddha once said, even *he* didn't find it easy to will renunciation. His mind didn't leap up at the idea. But his desire for a deathless happiness was strong enough and he coupled it with the discernment that could help him find ways of reasoning with his mind, find tactics for giving the mind pleasures that didn't have to depend on sensuality—primarily the pleasure of jhana, the pleasure of concentration. When you have an alternative source of pleasure like that, you realize that you're trading candy for gold. But the ability to make that trade is something you have to will.

The fourth thing is peace. The Pali word *upasama* also means stilling, or calm. And there are two perfections that are associated with that: patience and

equanimity. The word patience can also mean endurance: the ability to put up with difficult things. Here again you use your discernment to find strategies to strengthen that ability. One of the primary strategies is learning not to focus on the difficulty but to find ways of encouraging yourself, giving yourself energy. This is closely related to relinquishment and renunciation. You learn how to see the areas, the advantages of enduring. The mind becomes stronger, it can live in more difficult situations. It's not such a slave to its desires as it was before. There's a freedom that comes with endurance.

And equanimity, too, is something you have to will—the ability to stay unperturbed with the things you like and the things you don't like; not getting excited when things go well, not getting depressed when they don't. In other words, you train yourself to have a certain amount of independence. Discernment is needed to perfect and understand this quality, and the equanimity helps foster the discernment, allowing you to see things more clearly, as well. The two qualities go hand-in-hand. There are times in the meditation where you do simply have to sit and watch. Some of your defilements really will go away just when you watch them—but not all of them. One of the points of developing equanimity is so you begin to see where the difference lies.

So the Buddha is not recommending a blanket passivity here. He's telling you to develop equanimity when it's appropriate. You develop equanimity when you need to see things that you don't yet understand. When you understand, sometimes equanimity is still appropriate, and sometimes you need to do something more forceful to deal with the problem at hand.

All of these are things we have to will if we want to make progress on the path. The *if* there is important. We're free to will these qualities, we're free not to. This is why the Buddha never talked about Buddha nature, the idea that somehow our inherent nature is going to lead us to awakening. We do have freedom though, the freedom to choose. And the Buddha was a great respecter of that freedom. It's a little scary to think about the fact that awakening is not inevitable, for it's so easy to fall off the path. Sometimes the idea of inevitable awakening is much more reassuring—but it will make us complacent, which is precisely the quality that will lead us astray. We need to develop the heedfulness that comes when we realize that we are free to choose, that we can make right choices and wrong choices, and that we have to live with the consequences. This is why the Buddha said that heedfulness is what lies at the basis of all that is skillful. So try to develop that and learn how to live with that and not get scared by it; learn how to make it energizing, so that it keeps you alert while at the same time developing the sense of patience and equanimity, the calm that protects the effort of the path so that it doesn't get you all frazzled and worn out.

So these are the qualities that we will on the path. These are the qualities that

lead to awakening. If we learn how to respect our freedom, then that puts us on the path so that we understand what's going on. Ultimately, of course, all of these qualities will bring us to something that's not willed at all, but we're not going to really see it, we're not going to be able to test it and understand what's willed and what's not willed until we learn to understand our will very thoroughly—how far it goes, what subtle levels of willing can happen in the mind. In other words, we have to push the envelope of our will.

So ultimately this truth of the will does finally lead to something totally unwilled. This is one of the paradoxes of the teaching, but one that the Buddha is very upfront about—you're looking for something unfabricated, but you have to fabricate the path. As he said, the highest of all fabrications—which is another word for the highest of all things you can will—is the noble eightfold path. There is a dhamma higher than that—totally unwilled—which is dispassion, the rest that comes when you've succeeded in putting in the energy that's needed to will the path in a skillful way.

What this means is that the choice is up to us—which path we're going to follow—for there are many paths. There is a path that leads to hell. There's a path that leads to the animal rebirth. There is a path that leads to the human rebirth, and divine birth, and there is a path that leads to total awakening. The Buddha set them all out. But it's up to us to choose.

The Limits of Old Kamma

January 29, 2009

Focus your attention on the breath and see how it feels. Where do you notice it in the body first? Where does it seem most prominent? You might notice the passage of the air through the nostrils, the rise and fall of the chest, the expansion of the rib cage: There are lots of different places in the body where you can sense the movement of the breath. Whichever area seems most prominent, focus there.

And notice if the breath feels comfortable there. If it doesn't, you can let it change. Let it be longer or shorter, or think of it as becoming longer or shorter. You don't have to *make* it be that way or force it to be that way. Just pose that thought in mind: What would longer breathing be like? And you'll find the body will breathe longer. What would shorter breathing be like? Heavier, lighter, faster, slower? Explore the possibilities of the breath right now. Think of the breathing as a whole-body process and see what that does to your sense of what kind of breathing feels best or what the body needs in terms of the breath. Sometimes it needs to be energized, sometimes relaxed. Get a sense of the breath potentials right now.

We're sitting here with lots of different potentials—potentials in the body, potentials in the mind. As we meditate we explore to see which potentials lead to the greatest happiness, the greatest pleasure. Allow the breath to be pleasurable and also notice what your mind is doing, what potentials you have in your mind: What thoughts could you be thinking right now? What qualities could you develop? At the moment we're trying to emphasize the thoughts that focus you on the breath in the present moment; and we're trying to be inquisitive, trying to learn about the breath.

Those two factors—thinking of the breath or focusing on the breath, and being inquisitive—count as directed thought and evaluation, two of the factors of jhana. Use them to see how you can stay with the breath in a way that feels comfortable, giving rise to feelings of refreshment and pleasure. And as you probe and explore, you begin to realize that there is this potential right here for the body to feel comfortable from the inside, for the mind to be willing to settle down. There are lots of other potentials you could have focused on right now, but you don't have to. Make the most of your freedom to focus on your ability to expand skillful potentials.

Occasionally you'll find yourself running up against some blockages, or pains

that, no matter how skillfully you breathe, are going to stay as pains. Or there may be some chatter away in the mind that won't go away. You don't have to focus on it; just let it be there in the background. But it does impinge a little bit on your awareness.

In other words, you find yourself running up against old karma obstructions. Fortunately, though, the present moment is not totally shaped by old karma. If it were there'd be no point in practicing. There'd be nothing you could do. Everything would be determined by something that went before, which of course would have been determined by something that went before that and on back in an infinite regress. This is why the Buddha rejected the idea that everything was determined by a creator, or everything was determined by old karma. Otherwise the practice would be pointless.

But it's *not* pointless. We do have a measure of freedom here in the present moment. There may be some restrictions that come from past karma, but you can learn to work around them. This is a principle that applies across the board in the practice, not just while you're sitting here meditating, but in your activities throughout daily life. You find yourself running up against difficulties that, no matter how skillfully you try to respond to them, are still there. You have the choice of focusing on the difficulties to the point where you can't do anything about them, and get more and more entrapped and frustrated by them. Or if you try to ignore them and pretend they're not there, that doesn't work either. So you've got to find another approach. And fortunately, the best approach is always possible.

The present moment is a limited moment but it does have its openings. It does have its potentials. The wise approach is to admit the limitations but also to want to explore the potentials for what's skillful. If you have certain responsibilities, learn how to carry them out but at the same time, you're working on the qualities of the mind. That's what the Buddhist teachings about the *paramis* or the perfections are all about. Even as you go through your everyday responsibilities, you have the opportunity to develop good qualities of mind—patience, persistence, determination, truthfulness.

Some of us have a romantic notion about the ideal situation to meditate. You're off by yourself. No responsibilities at all. Totally free to meditate all day long. But even in places like that, you find there are limitations, difficulties. And if the meditation is not going well, what do you have to blame it on? Can't blame it on anybody else. It's just yourself. I know a lot of monks who've been out in the forest. They say sometimes they can go for months and months and months with no progress in the meditation. So it's not the case that going off alone and having no responsibilities is going to solve everything. If you do have responsibilities, remind yourself that you don't have to carry them around in the

mind all the time. Your outside work is your outside work. Your inside work can always keep going on—learning patience, learning to have a good humor about the whole thing.

A couple years back, we had a problem in the electric room here. The county inspector came and said that it was totally unacceptable. Everything was going to have to be torn out and redone within just a few days. So a couple of the Americans came and worked on it and complained the entire time about how difficult it was, how much they were having to do without sleep, and just on and on and on. And it wasn't helping the job at all. I kept thinking about how things were over in Thailand when we'd have difficulties like that. People there seem to have a much better humor about things. They seem to have a better understanding of the perfections, that even when things are difficult outside or inside, you've got the opportunity to develop good qualities of mind. Whatever the situation, you want to figure out the skillful way to approach it so that you minimize the difficulties and maximize your potentials for freedom.

If you're dealing with more than just present responsibilities—say, with the results of past mistakes where you've harmed people—the same principle applies. You admit the mistakes. You admit the limitations that they place on you now, but then you try to work around them. Don't let yourself be hemmed in by your past mistakes or be hemmed in by your past karma, because these things don't have to totally shape the present moment. We have some freedom right here, right now, and a lot of the practice is learning how to recognize that fact and maximize it to get the best use out of it.

Because all the aspects of the path are possible, whatever the limitations from your past karma are. You can learn how to be generous. You can learn how to be virtuous. You can learn how to develop good qualities of mind. When you've made a mistake, you admit the fact. And you say, "I'm going to learn from that. I'm not going to repeat that mistake." And that's as far as you have to go. You don't have to punish yourself, that somehow by feeling really, really sorry the punishment will go away. That's a dog's way of thinking. It knows it's done something bad. It gets on its back and wags its tail and looks really sorry, and hopes that by doing that it's going to appease you. But you're not a dog. You're a human being. As a human being, all you're asked is to recognize the mistake, resolve not repeat it, and then try to develop goodwill for yourself and for everybody else—for the people you've already wronged, for the people you might potentially wrong in the future. Spread goodwill to them, maintain that attitude of goodwill, and you'll be less likely to wrong them.

Or even just the fact that you're sitting here in a human body: That has its limitations but it has its potentials as well. If you're feeling trapped in the body, ask yourself, "Why are you trapped?" Well, you have this perception that it's you

or it's yours. You picked up the perception because there were times when it felt useful to identify with the body. It was a means for gaining pleasure. But now you're beginning to realize that identifying with the body has its drawbacks as well. As you get older, illness comes. Pains come. Even just the illness of hunger, the Buddha said, is the foremost illness. That's something we all suffer from every day, every day. This is why we have the reflection on the four requisites. If we didn't have food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, the body would die. We're born with these gaping needs.

But at the same time, you can learn how to use the body as a basis for the practice. You can focus on the breath. As you get more and more sensitive to the breath, you can use the breath as a mirror for the mind. If you get into difficult situations with other people, you'll notice that there will be a change in your breath. What can you do to work with the breath in a way that you're focused not on the difficulties posed by that other person, but on the fact that you can still maintain your evenness of mind regardless of the situation outside? You can use the breath to help you with that.

As you work with the breath, you begin to see the power of your perceptions in that the way you conceive of the breath is going to have an influence on how you actually breathe. If you think of the body as a big solid that you've got to push the breath through—it feels like this big lump of fat sitting here and you're trying to force air through the fat—it just doesn't work. It's laborious. It's tiring. But if you perceive the body as an energy field—when you breathe in, it's just more energy joining with the energy already there—it all flows in smoothly, and you don't have to push anything through anything else. It changes the way you breathe, changes the sensation of the breath.

As you think of all the different energy channels in the body connecting together, it gets easier and easier for you not to have to breathe at all. The different parts of the body aren't fighting with one another. Your pores feel open. The breath comes in, goes out. Everything feels connected. Everything is charged with breath energy to the point where the breath gets more and more gentle, more and more gentle, and finally grows still. A lot of this has to do with the perception you hold in mind.

You begin to realize, as the sense of boundary around the body begins to dissolve, that your perception of being in the body was something you've chosen to do. You're not really trapped in the body. You've trapped yourself, but you can free yourself. You can focus on space: around the body, permeating throughout the body, between all the atoms. You can focus on the awareness that encompasses everything. Your sense of what's happening in the body is going to change. And that's just a concentration practice. But the potential for experiencing infinite space or the potential for experiencing infinite

consciousness is all right here. You learn how to ferret it out and make the most of it.

So this is how we live with our past karma: Accept whatever limitations there are, but also look for the areas that are not limited, to see in which direction freedom lies. This means that when you're accepting the situation in the present, it's partly accepting the limitations and learning how to be equanimous about them, but also accepting that there are lots of potentials for freedom here. If you really want true happiness, you try to make the most of those. The Dhamma is not for people who want to be told they just have to accept the way things are, and that'll be totally fine. The Dhamma doesn't stop right there, because the present moment is not always a wonderful moment. It can be pretty miserable. Ask the victims of torture, of natural disasters. But even in extremely miserable situations, the same principle holds: You accept your limitations but you also accept that there are potentials for freedom, potentials for true happiness that can be developed. There's work to be done but it's good work, regardless of the situation. If you keep that attitude in mind you can practice the Dhamma and benefit from the Dhamma wherever you are.

The Buddha's Investment Strategy

February 16, 2009

As you focus on the breath and stay with the breath, you're developing good qualities of mind: mindfulness, alertness. As you apply these qualities to the process of breathing, you'll see that it's a kind of fabrication. There's a willed and intentional element in there. And because there's an element of will, you can change it. You can find ways of calming it down. This way you give rise to discernment as well, leading to concentration. These two qualities – discernment and concentration, as they're supported by mindfulness and alertness – bring the mind to greater and greater stillness, greater and greater clarity. So as we're working with the breath, we're not just working with the breath. We're also gaining insight into the processes in the mind.

This is a very useful and important investment of our time and energy. Sometimes you hear it said that when you meditate you're not supposed to have any sense of gaining or getting anything out of the meditation. But that teaching is simply an antidote to the impatience we normally bring to the meditation. You do a little bit of meditation and you want to get lots and lots of results right away. So you've got to learn how to put that attitude out of your mind. But, still, there *are* returns, there *are* benefits that come from meditation. And it is an investment—an investment in something reliable: these qualities of mind. They stay with you whether the economy goes up, whether the economy goes down. And whether the body gets healthier, gets sick, or when it dies, the qualities you've invested in will stay with the mind.

And so, given the fact we have a limited amount of time, a limited amount of energy, we want to make sure that we invest our time and energy in the most reliable things. If you invest in your attachments, you'll find that they give you some support for a certain amount of time, and then they start changing on you. As the Buddha said, everything fabricated – which means everything put together by causes – is inconstant. When you find yourself latching on to something inconstant, it can give you support only as long as it lasts, and then it's going to change. Even good qualities of the mind are inconstant, but the more you invest in them, the longer their impact, the longer their ability to support you, all the way through the process of aging, all the way through the process of illness, all the way through the process of death. These things stay there. And they can help you. The body is something you're going to have to let go of, and eventually you're going to have to let go of your memories, your thoughts, everything

having to do with this life. At that point, the irrevocable quality of time really pushes itself on you.

In terms of our day-to-day life, we tend to live in our narratives, our stories about this person, and that person, and the relationships we have with them, the things we've done. The reassuring quality of a narrative is that you can tell it again and again and again, and it seems to put this constant flow of time at bay for a while. But as things close down with the body, those narratives don't provide any help. In fact, they can make things even worse. The things you're going to miss, the things you're going to regret having done, will come pressing in on you. And you have to let go. If you haven't had any practice in letting go, it's going to be hard.

So this is an important skill to invest in: learning how to let go. The Buddha talks about different forms of wealth in the mind that you can invest in – in other words, qualities you can develop that can see you through – and the ability to let go is an important one.

Discernment is another. The Buddha had a very pragmatic approach to truth. As we talk about the truth of our statements, the things that we say, to what extent can you encompass the truth of the experience in words? Poets struggle with this all the time, and are constantly admitting that words are poor when it comes to capturing the actual experience of something. Pictures are a poor rendition of experience. As they say, a picture's worth a thousand words, but it can lie much more than a thousand words, too. What's really real in life are the processes happening right here, right now, the way we create words, the way we use words, the way we use ideas, and then the impact they have in terms of causing stress and suffering, or alleviating stress and suffering: That's a truth, that's a reality, much truer than the words themselves.

So you want to focus on really getting in touch with that reality. This doesn't mean that words are totally false. They convey some truth, and they're useful as tools. The impact they have on the mind is real. You look at the story of the Buddha's Awakening. They say he had three knowledges in the course of that night. The first was looking back on his past lifetimes. You think you have narratives to deal with in your life: He suddenly remembered eons and eons of narratives—where he had been, what he had been, his name, his appearance, the food he ate, the pleasure and pains that he'd experienced in that life, and then how he died. And then he moved on to another life, then another life.

But that knowledge wasn't his Awakening. So he went on to the second knowledge, which was knowledge of beings dying and being reborn all over the cosmos. In other words, moving from his own personal narrative, he went to a more general look at the cosmos as a whole, seeing that he wasn't the only one who was going through this process of repeated birth and death. Many, many

beings all the way from beings in hell, beings up to the various levels of heaven, even Brahmas, in states of infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, neither perception nor non-perception: They are all dying and being reborn, and moving around from level to level. Seeing all these movements, he was able to see that there was a general principle to them all, by looking at the cosmos as a whole. The general principle was that people suffered pleasure and pain because of their actions – their intentions – which in turn were determined by their views. If their views were wrong – in other words, if they felt that actions didn't have any impact, that it didn't really matter what you did, what you said, what you thought – they were going to suffer, because they were going to act on that belief and suffer from their lack of skill. If they believed that their actions did have an impact, were important, and it was important that you looked at your intentions, at your actions, and at their results, they'd experience pleasure.

Even seeing that, though, still didn't put an end to his own suffering. But it did give him some clues. Views and intentions are important. And so in terms of the third knowledge that night, he started looking at his views, looking at his intentions, right in the present moment, seeing them as activities in the mind: These intentions, based on a misunderstanding of what suffering is, where it comes from, how it can be ended, lead to more suffering. The views that do understand where suffering comes from, lead you to make the intention of the path, to put an end to that suffering, based on correct understanding of how you've got to look at the processes here in the present moment, particularly seeing how craving arises and how the mind flows with the craving, from moment to moment. As the Buddha later said, the way craving goes from moment to moment in this lifetime is the same process that's going to flow from the last moment of this life to the first moment of the next.

So you've got your laboratory right here. We're not concerned with what you are; the concern is with what you do. And you can see that. What you are is an abstraction, but what you can do is something you can watch right here, right now. That's something you can always watch if you have the intention and the understanding that helps you realize that this is something important to look at. Most of the time, though, we tend to look at other things. We get wound up in all our other narratives, all our other views, which tend to deflect our intention from the present moment. The mind is like a politician: The politician is doing his dirty work, but he keeps diverting our attention, pointing out that "Those other people are horrible; look at those horrible things other people are doing." But if you keep looking right here, right here, right here, staying with the breath, then because the breath is the closest thing to the mind, you begin to see the movements of the mind. You see how they cause suffering, and how they can put an end to suffering. That understanding is real. That process is something you

really see and it really happens. That's something you know for sure.

William James, the philosopher, talks about what's called a pragmatic approach to truth. You realize that the truth of a statement can only be approximate: Words can never give a totally comprehensive account of reality. But watching the mind in the process of creating a statement, watching it in the process of creating any of its views about reality, you see that it really does have an impact. So the statement – even though it may only be an approximate truth – does lead to a certain type of action, and the action leads to certain type of result, which you can experience directly. The experience of that process is a truth of a different order.

So it's important that you learn how to develop the ideas that will lead you to act in ways that put an end to suffering. If you encounter any idea that leads to more suffering, more ignorance, more craving, you don't have to hold onto it. You can let it go.

So as we're sitting here, trying to stay focused on the breath and noticing when the mind wanders off: That ability to drop a thought mid-sentence, drop a thought even when it's all loose ends, is an important skill. You catch yourself in the middle of creating a little reality there but then you can reestablish your frame of reference in the present moment. You get more and more skillful at letting go, able to catch yourself in these various processes more and more quickly, and you gain a deeper understanding of why you go for these things. All of these skills are going to stand you in good stead. They're good skills to invest in.

So you need to make the time—the time isn't going to happen on its own, you know—you have to make the time to practice. Create the time to practice. Open that space in your life, so you can invest that time in the skills that are really going to be helpful all the way through. Because suffering is real – but the end of suffering is also real. That's why the time spent investing in understanding these things, mastering the skills for putting an end to suffering, is time well spent. You suffer less. The people around you suffer less as well. As you go through the process of aging, illness, and death, if you can manage your mind, the other problems that come up are going to be minor.

So this is the Buddha's investment strategy – invest in good qualities of the mind, develop a mind that you can trust not to go flailing around when things get difficult. That's the wisest investment of all.

A Soiled, Oily Rag

(Three Perceptions in Context)

April 20, 2009

Back when I was with Ajaan Fuang—this is after I had started translating some of Ajaan Lee’s books and sending them around—a group of people in Singapore who had received some of the books started a correspondence. One of the first letters we got from one of the members of the group was from a bank official who was saying that his practice of meditation was to see everything in terms of the three characteristics, that everything was inconstant, stressful and not-self. Whether he was at work, meditating, watching the TV, whatever, he was trying to see everything in terms of those three characteristics.

I read this to Ajaan Fuang, translating it for him. And he said, “Write back and tell him to look at what it is that’s saying those things are inconstant, stressful and not-self, because the problem lies with that part of the mind.” In other words, just seeing those things in terms of those three perceptions is not enough. We have to use those perceptions within the larger context for the practice, which is the four noble truths. Turn around and look at what it is that wants to crave those things, wants to desire those things. Because the reason we look at them as inconstant, stressful and not-self, is to remind us that you can’t find any true happiness in them. They change. They’re stressful while they change. And you don’t have any ultimate control over them, so why would you want to try to build a happiness based on those things? What kind of happiness could you get based on those things? It’s bound to wobble. It’s bound to fall apart.

We have to keep hammering this message into the mind because it’s always looking for happiness in terms of those things. And you have to keep reminding it, No, that’s not where happiness is found. For happiness to be true it would have to be something long-term with no stress, and not outside of your control. These are the reflections that lead to the question that the Buddha said is the beginning of wisdom: What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? My—long-term—welfare and happiness. The three perceptions are related to those three parts of that question. If something is inconstant, it can’t be long-term. If it’s stressful, it can’t be your ultimate welfare and happiness. And if it lies outside of your control, it’s not yours.

So you’re trying to train that part of the mind that’s looking for happiness

there. You're trying to develop a sense of dispassion around the raw materials from which you usually build your sense of the world, your sense of who you are, and the happiness that you're going to find in the world. Ajaan Maha Boowa compares these three perceptions to a stick for beating the hand of a mischievous monkey who always likes to grab things. As it reaches out to grab something, you hit it with a stick and say, No. It reaches out again, you hit it again. Until finally it realizes it can't hold onto those things.

When you see that these things can't provide a true happiness, the other question is: Where else are you going to look? This is where the role of conviction in the practice comes: that if we learn how to let go of these things, there will be a true happiness. In other words, you're sticking with that original question: What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? We're not giving up on the idea of true happiness. We're not saying, "Well, I guess I should just accept things as they are, and not try to have any unrealistic desires for anything lasting or true." That's not the kind of teaching the Buddha would give. He's just telling us, "You're looking in the wrong place."

This is why the duty with regard to the first noble truth is that we should comprehend it. We're trying to comprehend what suffering is so that we can stop looking to it for happiness, so that we can start looking someplace else.

To comprehend suffering includes comprehending what causes it. Because suffering includes clinging that comes from a combination of clinging and craving, you've got to look at why you want to continue to crave these things.

As Ajaan Suwat once said, we crave these things because we like them. Our likes and dislikes get in the way. So look very carefully at what you actually get out of these things. The Buddha said to look both for the arising and passing away of these things, and then for their allure—the satisfaction, the gratification you get out of them—as well as for their drawbacks. If there weren't some allure, you wouldn't reach for them. You wouldn't grab at them. You wouldn't hold on. And there are many things that we hold on to but we don't like to admit that we're getting a certain amount of pleasure from them. Anger, for instance. Most people say, "Oh, I don't like my anger. I wish I could get rid of it." Well, one reason you can't get rid of it is because there's a part of the mind that is actually getting a little bit of food, a little bit of nourishment out of the anger. There's some enjoyment that comes with the anger. And if you don't ferret out that part of the mind and see what that enjoyment is, you'll never be able to let go.

So that's an important part of comprehending the stress and suffering: to see what incites you to cling in the first place, to keep holding on and to hold on again and again even as these things keep slipping out of your grasp.

Now to do this, you've got to observe the other duties that go along with the

four noble truths. In other words, as you're learning to comprehend suffering, there should come a point when the mind realizes: This is not worth it. The image the Buddha gives is of a blind man who has been given a soiled oily rag. The person giving it to him tells him that it's a clean white rag, so the blind man is very protective of it. He folds it up, and takes very good care of it because he thinks it's a nice white piece of cloth. Later, when he's finally he is treated by a doctor and gets his eyesight back, he can see what it really is: It's just a soiled old rag.

So this is why we try to comprehend the five aggregates, the six sense media in terms of those three perceptions: to see that they're just soiled old rags. At the same time, we're looking for where the gratification is in holding onto them—our ignorant misunderstanding that they're something of value. Then you want to comprehend the drawbacks of craving these things until you really do develop a sense of dispassion. With the dispassion, you start letting go of the craving. That's the second duty with regard to the noble truths: to let go of the cause of suffering.

To get the mind in the right place to be able to do this and not feel threatened by the idea of letting go, you develop the path, a healthy sense of self that comes with virtue, the sense of well-being that comes with concentration that also allows you to settle down and look at things clearly. You look first at your other attachments—to things aside from the path—so that you're ready for the insight that sees, "Oh, this isn't worth holding on to. All these things that I've identified as me or mine: They're just soiled, oily rags. Or like that Far Side cartoon of a cow, out in the pasture with a lot of other cows. It suddenly jerks back its head, with a startled look on its face, and it spits out a mouthful of grass, saying, "Grass! This is just grass! We've been eating grass!" You see that the things you've been holding on to are just that: grass. Nothing really worth holding on to, especially considering all the effort that goes into trying to create a reliable happiness out of these things.

Because ultimately that's what it comes down to: Our attachment comes from the belief that no matter how much effort goes into it, it's worth it, because the happiness outweighs the effort. But when you really look at these things carefully, you begin to see, No, the effort way outweighs the little taste of happiness, the little taste of pleasure that you get from holding on to these things. And having the mind in a good solid state of concentration helps you see that because you've got a more solid state of well-being, a more lasting sense of pleasure, a well-being that can permeate the whole body, so that compared to the pleasure and ease of concentration, these other pleasures are really not worth it. Whereas the effort that goes into the concentration really does pay off.

So you work on developing that even further, until you get to the point

where you're ready to let go of that too. You begin to see that even concentration is composed of aggregates to which you've been holding on to. And the same principle applies. These things arise and pass away too. They're stressful. Inconstant, stressful, and you see them as not-self. You're not looking at this in terms of some abstract theory of whether there is or is not a self. You're looking at where you're feeding for your pleasure and you realize, even this is not worth it. As the Buddha said, if the aggregates didn't give some pleasure, we wouldn't hold on to them. We wouldn't crave them. But we also have to see that there's stress involved in holding onto them as well. Once the aggregates as they have been shaped into right concentration have done their work, you no longer need the effort that goes into them. You can let them go. That's when the mind opens up to something that doesn't require any effort at all: the ultimate happiness.

Notice that that's not the ultimate equanimity. The Buddha never said nirvana is the ultimate equanimity. He said it's the ultimate happiness. You don't turn your mind into a resigned oatmeal kind of state. You find that by letting go, things open up immensely. No limits of space or time. And no need to put in any effort. As to whether you'd call that a self or not, you don't want to call it a self, you don't want to say, there is no self, because that issue is totally irrelevant. One of the ways of getting to that state is, as the Buddha said, to put aside your ideas about existence or nonexistence by just watching things arising and passing away, and seeing them simply as stress arising and passing away. You see that it's just that—stress, arising and passing away—so you can let go of it. You let go of any attempt to build a happiness out of those things.

Having put the mind into a state where ideas of existence and nonexistence are irrelevant, where they just don't occur to you, there's no reason why you'd want to go around banging people over the head with the idea that there is no self, say, or that there is a true transcendent self. There's simply a dimension that lies beyond even the concepts of existence and nonexistence, and it can be experienced, it can be touched. That's all that really matters. That's the attainment we're working toward.

All these teachings have their strategic purpose. And it's important that we keep using them for their strategic purpose. We're not here to argue, we are not here to establish the one right view about reality. We're here to find ways of putting an end to suffering.

So remember those three perceptions. And that's what the Buddha called them, "perceptions": the perception of inconstancy, the perception of stress, the perception of not-self. He never called them characteristics. He never talked about three characteristics. You do a search for the term, "three characteristics" in the Pali Canon, and you're not going to find it. The Buddha's talking about a way of perceiving that helps you see through your attachments, that helps you see

through your delusions about where you can find happiness, so that the question that lies at the beginning of wisdom—“What when I do it will lead to my true long-term welfare and happiness?”—finally gets its answer in the skills you’ve developed. And part of the strategy in mastering those skills is to master the tasks that are appropriate to the four noble truths. That’s what we’re doing: We’re working on those tasks so that we can handle them skillfully. We want to skillfully comprehend stress and suffering, so we can understand why it is that we keep feeding on these things, even though they ultimately lead to disappointment. That helps us develop dispassion for the craving that keeps pushing us in that direction, so that we can let it go. At the same time, we’re developing the path that puts the mind in a position where it can do this without feeling threatened, until it no longer needs that particular position, that particular center. Then you can take that apart as well.

Then when you’ve arrived at the ultimate happiness, nirvana, you’ve used the Buddha’s teachings for their intended purpose. That’s what it’s all about.

Taking Charge

July 21, 2009

The passage we chanted last night: *Atano loko*, the world offers no shelter. *Anabhissaro*, there is no one in charge. When you think about it in one way it's scary. There is no greater power that you can turn everything over to. There's no guarantee that everything is going to come out all right in the end. That's the scary interpretation. The other interpretation sees this as an opportunity: You're free to choose. You are free to write the story of your own life because there is nobody up there taking down the narrative from their point of view. You can write the story of your life right now. You can write one little bit of it right now. But sometimes that little bit can be very important. It can change the whole plot.

If you look back at your past, there are many actions that point in different directions. The story could head off in all kinds of directions from here. And so with each choice, you're deciding which parts of your past are relevant, which parts get stitched into the overall story, and which parts are just extra bits and pieces left over. So what do you want? What kind of life do you want? Now unfortunately, not everything is totally there for you to make up. There are certain givens in your life. Some things you can't change. And there's also simply the fact of action, the fact of cause and effect. If you want a good life, you have to create the causes for the good life. If you want happiness, you have to create the causes for happiness. It's up to you. As always, freedom entails responsibility.

So it's important, as you contemplate your path that you fully appreciate both sides, both the freedom and the responsibility. Sometimes we underestimate the freedom. We see that our lives have followed certain patterns and we just kind of let them go into the same old ruts over and over again, regardless of where those ruts are going to lead. We don't appreciate the freedom of choice we have to choose our identity. Every time the mind takes on an identity, that identity is already ready to fall apart, which means that if you've been taking on unskillful identities, you don't have to stick with them. You can change.

The thing about change here, though, is that it depends on your actions. This is where the responsibility comes in. You have to be responsible. You have to be totally honest with yourself about what your intentions are, so that you recognize an unskillful one when it comes up. You recognize a skillful one when it comes up. And then do your best to strengthen the skillful ones, weaken the unskillful ones.

As the Buddha often said, the things you keep thinking about form the inclination of the mind. And so as with any new habit, it takes a while to get used to the new habit. But you can lay down these new patterns in your brain, you can lay down these new patterns in your actions.

So you should ask yourself, what kind of life do you want? And then what choices does that kind of life require right now? If you're honest with yourself, you want a life of true happiness, a life that harms nobody. That requires that you develop a lot of qualities in the mind: mindfulness, alertness, compassion, goodwill, discernment, concentration, conviction in the principle of action. These are going to be related in one way or another to what are called the five strengths. For to move your life in the direction you want it to requires strength, especially if you're having to change directions.

So you need to have conviction in the principle of action, that your actions really do make a difference. When the Buddha talks about knowing yourself, it's largely knowing your actions. Because your actions are the results of choices that come and go, you can change yourself through changes in your actions. And these changes are important. The choices you make are important. You need to have conviction in that principle. If you're not convinced of the importance of your actions, your actions start getting careless. So keep reminding yourself: You're the one in charge. If there's nobody else in charge, you can take charge. And you actually are taking charge each time you make a choice. So you can't abdicate your responsibility, saying, "Somebody else told me to do this. I am just following orders." The fact that you choose to follow orders is your karma right there. So you need conviction in the principle that your actions are important, and you can change them. It may take time. It may take effort. But they can be changed.

The next strength is persistence. You really stick with this. Once you've decided that a certain quality needs to be developed in your mind, you stick with it. You do whatever needs to be done. If you need to work on concentration, just keep coming back, coming back, coming back to the breath. If you find that certain defilements are getting in the way, you have to work on them, figure out ways to think around them so you don't constantly follow their song, their voices. So regardless of the quality that needs to be developed in the mind, or whichever one you're focusing on, you've got to keep coming back, coming back, coming back, to make sure that it's strong, that it really has become a new habit, a new skill.

This requires mindfulness, keeping in mind what you've got to do. Mindfulness is always paired with alertness, watching what you're actually doing to see if it does fall in line. This is where the principle of honesty comes in, because there is nobody up there to whom we can turn to give us the final word

on what's right and wrong. We have to be really honest with ourselves. When I do X what are the results? Do they cause harm, do they not cause harm? Look very, very carefully. This is why, when the Buddha taught Rahula this principle, he first started with the principle of truthfulness. If you're not truthful, he says, there's no quality of a practitioner in you. It's been turned upside down, thrown away. It's empty and hollow. Your own honesty is your one authority, your one refuge.

So you keep in mind what you've got to do and then you keep checking your actions to make sure that they fall in line with that. This is a process that gets more and more subtle as it develops. The duty here is not something imposed from without. When the Buddha talks about duties, the only duties he really describes as universal are the duties appropriate to the Four Noble Truths. He doesn't impose them on you, but once you've decided that you want to put an end to suffering, you've taken on those duties yourself. You want to comprehend the suffering and abandon its cause. So wherever you look in your mind, wherever you look in your actions, make sure that you're following in line with these duties, trying to develop the path. If you find yourself wandering off, okay, more persistent effort is required.

And as your effort gets more and more skillful, it moves into right concentration. This is the culmination of your effort to renounce sensuality, to renounce ill will, to renounce harmfulness. When it's really resolved on those things, where else will the mind go but into good concentration? Then as the mind is really concentrated, it's able to be secluded from unskillful mental states. And when unskillful mental states come back, you can see them clearly. This is how concentration fosters discernment.

And, in turn, the discernment fosters your concentration. You begin to notice that the way the mind is concentrated is not as effortless as it could be, it's not as refined, it's not as solid as it could be. You work on adjusting those causes, adjusting your choices: where you focus, how you focus, how you manipulate the object, like the breath, to get the mind to settle down further. When you know that you've reached the point where you don't need to manipulate it any more, that you can just be with the breath: All of this requires discernment.

So if you look carefully at all five of these strengths, you realize that they're very much interconnected. It's not just 1-2-3-4-5 bingo! Discernment comes back and helps your effort. After all, you need to have some knowledge of what's skillful and not for your right effort to be right on course. Discernment helps your conviction, so that it doesn't go running off into strange ways. The image the Buddha gives is of building a house. You put the rafters up to support the main roof beam, but only when the main roof beam is in place are the rafters solid too. So discernment builds on the other strengths and then it turns around

to make those strengths even stronger by ensuring that they really do work together.

So if you're going to be responsible, if you're going to have freedom, you need strength. The strength to make the right decision, the strength to keep on making the right decisions.

When you think about that passage, that there's no one in charge, what it means is that here's your opportunity to take charge in your life. It carries responsibilities. You have to be honest. But it also brings a lot of freedom. On a very deep level, there's nobody out there you have to please. You act kindly because it's your choice. You're generous because it's your choice. You're virtuous, you meditate, because it's your choice.

So take full advantage of your freedom. Really appreciate the fact that we are free to choose, and that that freedom can lead to a freedom going beyond simply the freedom to choose. Absolute freedom, absolutely unlimited: That's the happiness the Buddha promises. But you can find it only if you take charge.

Views & Vision

July 29, 2009

The mind spends a lot of its time talking to itself. And so when we come to the practice, it's important that we learn how to use that habit in a skillful way, so that it actually helps the practice and doesn't get in the way.

If you've read any of the texts, you know that when the mind gets into deep concentration, the sentences and dialogues that go on in the mind get pared down really far to the point where there's just a mental note, like "infinite space," the *sañña* of "infinite consciousness." That's all the talking that's going on in the mind.

But right now, if you feel harassed by all the chatter going on in the mind, that sounds pretty good. Just hold on to one thought, one object, and get away from all the torment of what's being said inside the mind. But you can't get there until you've learned how to train the mind how to talk to itself skillfully, what sorts of things are important to talk about, and what sort of things are not, what attitude to take. And unfortunately for most of us, we've learned lots of unskillful ways of talking. If it's not from our family, then it's from school, or from the media. We talk about all the wrong topics, or talk about things in ways that actually discourage us from practicing, either specific ideas about ourselves, or attitudes in general.

One of the most virulent attitudes going around is the only way you're going to find happiness is through sensual indulgence. You can cite Freud. You can cite all these other psychotherapists as authorities, but then again, what kind of authority are they? It just so happens that their opinions fit in with the needs of the economy. And so those thoughts get pounded into our heads again and again and again: their idea of what's important to talk about. So we've got to learn how to retrain these voices in our minds, what sort of issues are important to talk about and what sort of issues are important to just leave aside. And as for the important issues to talk about, how do you talk about them? How do you encourage yourself in the practice?

The Buddha recommends ten topics for recollection for the purpose of giving you energy, counteracting any unskillful chatter in the mind and replacing it with skillful chatter. You can recollect the Buddha, to remind yourself that it is possible to find true happiness through human effort. After all, when the Buddha talked about his awakening, he didn't say it was because he was some special

being beamed down from the sky. He simply developed qualities of the mind that all of us have in potential form. So that raises our sights as to what we can do with our lives.

You can think about the Dharma, in that it recommends a totally harmless form of happiness, a happiness that doesn't pose any danger to you, doesn't pose any danger to anybody else, doesn't harm anybody. This is why they recommend that when monks are in the forest, and they start getting scared about the dangers in the forest—the animals, the people who might be lurking in the wilderness, the diseases that can come, the fact that you are far away from doctors, anything of any comfort—simply remind yourself you're there in a totally harmless way. And that can give you confidence.

You can recollect the Sangha. If comparing yourself to the Buddha seems like a far stretch, you can think, "Well, there were people who studied with the Buddha who were really like us. Some cases a lot worse off than we are right now. And yet they were able to pull themselves together, gain awakening."

So these are recollections to overcome fear and lack of self-esteem. Similarly with the recollection of your virtue, times in the past when you could have harmed somebody or done something against your principles, but you decided not to. Your principles were more important. Think about that. You have worth as a human being because of that.

The same when you were generous. For many of us our first real experience of freedom was when we realized we could give something to somebody else not because we had to, or it was their birthday or Christmas or anything. Simply because you wanted to share. Something you could have used yourself, but you said No, I want to give it to somebody else. It's good to reflect on that.

You can think about the qualities that would make you a deva, things like a sense of shame at the idea of doing something really harmful, other good qualities of the mind. You have those at least to some extent. So reflect on that. Again, these reflections are meant to give you a sense of self-confidence, self-esteem. To remind you that even though you may have done a lot of unskillful things in the past, you do have your skillful potentials. And it's up to you to decide which past actions are the important actions in your life story.

We all have a mixed bag in the past. You can think about this as if someone were writing your life story. And if you decide to stick with the skillful path, that means that the skillful qualities you had in the past are the important ones. If you stray away from the skillful path, that means the unskillful qualities, the unskillful things you did in the past are the important ones.

So as you shape the present, you're not only shaping the present, but also highlighting different things in your past. So why not highlight the good things?

If you find yourself focusing on the bad ones, remind yourself, “At least I had some good qualities in the past and those are the ones that eventually won out. At least they are winning out right now.” If a part of your mind retorts, “While you may be winning out right now, you’re going to lose out further down the line,” you respond, “I don’t care about further down the line. I’m not responsible for further down the line right now. I want to make sure that at least right now I make the right choice.” So at least there is a little uptick in the general line of your life. And once you’ve decided to do that once, you can do it again, and you can do it again, until it becomes a habit.

Then there are the reflections to make sure that you don’t be heedless and complacent. There’s recollection of death: the fact that death could come at any time and that you’ve got to prepare because death isn’t the end. As long as there’s craving in the mind, it jumps onto another life. The image the Buddha gave is of a fire burning one house that then jumps across to another house, burns the next house, then the next. So what kind of house are you going to? The image kind of breaks down here, but the craving is what pulls you on.

What kind of cravings are you nurturing in your mind right now? What cravings would be more skillful to nurture? What habits do you want to take with you as you go on? You realize there is work to be done in the mind. You can’t just put it off to tomorrow or the next day or next week or next month or next year. Because you don’t know if you have a next day or a next month or a next year. But you do know that you have right now. This breath coming in and out right now. If it so happened that you suddenly died right now, wouldn’t you prefer to be in a moment of mindfulness and alertness rather than wandering around thinking about who knows what? So that’s a recollection to make you more heedful, to help overcome laziness.

There’s mindfulness immersed in the body, which is to help you remember, “Do you want to keep coming back as a human being, or would you rather come back as something better?” There’s always that issue at death when people are really possessive of their bodies. They come back as a spirit hovering around their dead body. Would you like to do that? This body may seem okay while it’s alive, but when it’s dead, it’s really not that attractive a place to be. Can you learn how to develop a sense of detachment from your own body now, so you’re not afraid to let it go when you have to?

And then mindfulness of the breath is a practice for developing all those good qualities that you need to make your aims a reality: mindfulness, alertness, ardency, concentration, and discernment. This is the recollection that you can make your home.

Then finally there’s recollection of peace: the peace of nirvana. Remind yourself that this is really the direction you want to go, that there is an

attainment of true happiness. Keep reminding yourself of the direction where true happiness lies so that you don't get distracted by other ideas about happiness.

Now if you find yourself having trouble settling down with the breath, you've got these other topics to think about. They should always be there in the background where you can draw on them when you need them. As long as the mind needs to think, have it think about something that's really useful. As long as it's going to talk to itself, make sure the conversation is actually a skillful conversation. Otherwise, you can spend all your time in views, without any vision. It's a distinction the Buddha makes in the *Metta Sutta*. He describes the ideal meditator as "not taken with views, but consummate in vision." We spend most of our time talking about, "I think this about that, I think that about this, this is my opinion on politics, this is my opinion on the Michael Jackson feeding-fest in the media and whatever." But does it really matter?

A while back I was reading Mark Twain's autobiography, and occasionally he talks about political issues of the day. His political opinions are really the least interesting part about Mark Twain. His more interesting opinions are those about the universals of human nature. You should have that attitude towards your own thoughts. Your really interesting thoughts are about the more universal things, particularly this issue of vision, which means that you actually see what the mind is doing, see how it's creating suffering for itself. And this may not be a topic that you can talk about with other people, but at least it doesn't lead to controversy. And it's the most important issue you can talk about with yourself.

As the Buddha said, the source of all conflicts in the world comes from a type of thinking he calls *papañca*, mental proliferation, where your thoughts just get out of control to the point where they come back and attack you, i.e. they put you into difficulties, they create trouble for you. These thoughts come from one basic notion: "I am the thinker." You want to establish your identity through your opinions about things. The Buddha did not encourage this kind of thinking. Questions that come from this—"Who am I? What am I? What will I be?"—are, he said, questions that are inappropriate if you really want to put an end to suffering, because instead of freeing you, they get you more tied up with views and opinions.

For instance, the question about what happens to an awakened person after death: Does the person exist? Not exist? Both? neither? If you're asking these questions because you're worried about what's going to happen to this "I" who's been doing the thinking, the Buddha wouldn't answer you. He didn't want to encourage that kind of thinking. He wanted to encourage the type of thinking that looks at: "Is there suffering here right now? Where? What am I doing that's causing the suffering? What can I do to put an end to it?"

It's interesting to reflect that here we are, learning about ourselves through meditation, but what kind of self-knowledge is this? The questions, "Who am I, what am I, what was I in the past, what am I going to be in the future?"—those questions the Buddha said to put aside. The self-knowledge he was more interested in is, "What am I doing right now? What are the results of what I'm doing? What when I do it will be skillful, leading to good results? What when I do it would be unskillful, leading to harmful results? What would be for my long-term suffering, what would be for my long-term happiness? Those kinds of questions are worth asking. In other words, seeing yourself as having the power to create long-term happiness and then asking yourself, "How can I develop that potential?" But you should also learn to see that you have the potential for creating a lot of harm and suffering, so how can you avoid *that* potential?

That kind of self-knowledge: that's vision. And it's really useful. Unfortunately, our society encourages us to have views about things yet doesn't encourage much vision. But you can train yourself. You can drop the ways that society teaches you to talk to yourself, and train yourself in new ways that point you in the direction of vision. You're not simply a product of social pressures and social influences, because there is something that really is totally yours, which is suffering. No one else can experience your suffering. Nobody knows how much you suffer, how you suffer. That's something only you can know, but you can really know it. And as the Buddha points out, you can also learn how not to suffer. That kind of self-knowledge: that's vision. And you have the freedom to develop that if you want.

No Happiness Other than Peace

October 9, 2009

N'atthi santi param sukham, there is no happiness other than peace. This saying of the Buddha has an interesting history. Over time, the translation turned from “there is no happiness *other* than peace” to “there is no happiness *higher* than peace,” which totally changes the meaning. Perhaps people thought that there are other kinds of happiness not related to peace at all—the happiness of winning out over somebody else, the happiness of sensual desire, even the happiness that goes along with being angry. People like to be angry. There’s a certain amount of pleasure with that and all the other defilements, and there’s certainly no peace there.

But if you look carefully, you’ll see that even in the defilements there is a moment of rest, a moment of certainty, a moment of settling in, even if just for a second. And sometimes it lasts longer. After all, the Buddha did recognize that it’s possible to get into very strong states of absorption based on greed, aversion, and delusion. They’re wrong concentration but they are absorption and there’s an element of peace, an element of stillness there. Whatever pleasure those things contain, it lies in those moments of peace, those moments of certainty. Of course the problem with those kinds of peace is that they don’t last very long and they’re very toxic, because they can lead to all sorts of disturbance afterwards.

This is why the Buddha said we have to search for the highest peace together with the highest happiness. They go together. And this is why the search for the highest happiness is not a selfish thing. The Buddha honors our desire for true happiness. Everywhere, he says, this path is for happiness and we should take our desire for happiness seriously. It’s not something we should be ashamed of. We don’t have to say, “Well, I’ll delay my own happiness and make other people happy first.” That’s not the Buddha’s approach at all. He says that if you take your search for happiness seriously, and find a happiness that really is reliable, it will take you to peace—to the highest peace where you are not harming anyone anywhere.

And in the course of developing that happiness, we have to develop really honorable qualities of mind. There’s the wisdom that sees that long-term happiness is better than short-term, and that it has to depend on your actions. That’s why the question that lies at the beginning of wisdom or discernment is, “What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” The wisdom lies in the long-term, and it lies in the fact that you recognize you’ve got

to *do* something for this happiness to come about.

Then there's the compassion that comes as a corollary of that, which is you realize that if your peace is going to last, if your happiness is going to last, it has to depend on not causing any harm to anybody else. Otherwise they'll try to destroy it. So you have to take their desire for peace, their desire for happiness into consideration.

There's a passage where the Buddha tells King Pasenadi that you can search the whole world over, and you'll find no one who doesn't have fierce love for themselves. You have fierce love for yourself. Everyone else has the same fierce love for themselves. So if your happiness gets in the way of their fierce love of themselves, they're not going to stand for it. There'd be no peace.

So you have to look for a happiness that doesn't depend on harming anybody and that requires purity in your actions: the purity of genuinely causing no harm. You have to look very carefully at your actions. What are you doing that could be causing harm to yourself, harm to other people? It's certainly not wise if you're doing that. And although there may be general instructions about which kinds of actions are harmful and which ones are not, there are a lot of little details that can't be put in books, that you have to learn to observe for yourself. So you have to watch each action by watching your intention first, checking that out to see if it's an honorable intention, and then watching your action as you're doing it to see what immediate results it's producing. If it's producing harmful results, stop. If not, you can continue. After you're done, look at the long-term results. If you find out only afterwards that you've caused harm, then you have to make up your mind not to engage in that kind of action ever again, that kind of intention ever again. Then go talk it over with someone whose insight you trust.

This is an important part of the Buddha's instruction on what we now call self-knowledge. For him, self-knowledge doesn't mean knowing yourself as a *thing*, it means knowing yourself in terms of *actions*. And he provides a context in which you can do this effectively. This is why he set up the monastic Sangha, so we'd have a group of people who are following the Buddha's teachings, that anybody can come and consult with and say, "I did this, and I got these results. What should I do?" In other words, you don't have to reinvent the Dharma wheel every time you find you've made a mistake. You can tap into the knowledge and experience of people who are further along on the path. This is how we develop purity. As the Buddha told Rahula, all those in the past who purified their thoughts, words, and deeds did it in this way. All those in the future who are going to purify their thoughts, words, and deeds will do it this way. And all of those at present who are purifying their thoughts, words, and deeds do it this way.

What this means is that if you take your search for happiness seriously, you

have to develop wisdom, compassion, and purity, the virtues that are traditionally ascribed to the Buddha himself. This is part of his skill as a teacher to show that if you take your happiness seriously, you have to develop good qualities of mind. It's not a purely hedonistic pursuit, nor are you simply learning how to indulge in pleasure in a sophisticated way. You realize that happiness is something important, and if it really is important, then you have to develop important qualities of mind.

As we do this, we find that our actions become less and less harmful; there is less and less cause for conflict. On the one hand, that makes it easier for us to practice. On the other hand, it makes the world a better place to be in general—and in particular, in terms of our thoughts, the world of our own mind becomes better, too, because, of course, our actions and words come out of our thoughts. This is where the Buddha finds the source of conflict to begin with.

There's a sutta where Sakka, the king of the devas, comes down to see the Buddha with some questions to ask him. It's an interesting sutta. It starts out with Sakka trying to get the Buddha in the right mood to talk with the deva king. So he sends down one of his musicians. It's one of the nicer pieces of humor in the Pali Canon. The musician comes down, he sings a song about the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, and lust. The song is directed to his ladylove, telling her how he loves her as much as the arahants love the Dhamma, cataloging her body parts, the parts he loves as much as the arahants love the Dhamma. You can imagine the Buddha smiling to himself with the thought, "This is a totally deluded little deva here." But at the end of the song, he compliments the deva on having written a song where the melody goes well with words, and the words go well with the melody. After all, the Buddha had been a prince, a connoisseur of music, so he would know.

Then Sakka comes and asks the Buddha questions about conflict. I don't know if you know the story, but Indian mythology has a story very similar to one in Greek mythology. There's a story of how the devas fought the asuras for control of heaven and finally beat the asuras—just as the Greek gods had to fight the Titans. And so Sakka, having had to wage war even when he was a deva king, was very concerned about conflict. "What are the roots of conflict?" he asks. The Buddha traces them back—through acquisition, desire, all the way back to *papañca*, or objectification, the type of thinking where you turn yourself into an object and then turn everybody else into an object. As an object or being, you need a place to stay in the world, a place to take the food that will keep you going as a being. So you have to stake out your territory in the world—whether it's physical territory, material territory, emotional territory, even your views. This leads to conflict. After all, as you move into the world, you run into other people, other beings who are involved in the project of objectifying themselves and they

may not like the role that you assign to them. There is conflict right there.

Psychologists talk a lot about objectification, how we turn other people into objects, and the Buddha's insight was that we start out by turning ourselves into objects first. To stop the process, we first have to change the way we view ourselves. This is why the path to peace and calm—*upasama*, as they say in the suttas—starts with right view. Instead of looking at your experience in terms of yourself and other people or the world, i.e., objects in the world, you look at things simply in terms of the four noble truths—as stress, its cause, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation—terms that don't refer to people at all. But each of these terms carries a skill.

In the case of stress, you have to comprehend it, which means knowing it so thoroughly, seeing it so thoroughly, that you finally get dispassionate toward it. In the case of the origination of stress, you abandon it, which means not continuing to do it anymore. The cessation of stress is to be witnessed, or verified, and the path is to be developed.

Each of the four noble truths has three levels of knowledge: knowing the truth, knowing the duty or skill appropriate to the truths, and then knowing that you've completed the duty, mastered the skill. Three times four gives you twelve aspects of the knowledge of awakening, which is what the Dhamma wheel stands for. Back in India when they combined sets of variables and list all the possible combinations, they would call it a wheel. So this is the Dhamma wheel. And it's interesting that the first sermon is the only place in the whole Canon where the Buddha mentions this. It's his most important teaching. You'd think it would be all over the Canon. But it's just in the context of this one talk. There are a few reflections on the topic in a few other places, but this is the only place where he sets it out clearly. But it's a teaching we have to keep in mind all the time.

This is why he has us divide our experience into the four noble truths: so we can know what to do with whatever comes up. If we still think in terms of selves and the world, our duty is to stake out our part of the world that we claim for the self, and then to defend it. But here he has us look at things in other terms, with other duties. For instance with stress, if you think of yourself as a self, you don't like having the stress in yourself. You try to get rid of it. But getting rid of it is not the duty under the four truths. The duty is to comprehend it, to know it. That requires you to develop the path—with the mind in good strong concentration, mindful and alert, imbued with right effort—so you can develop the skill needed to comprehend stress. Because each of the tasks is actually a skill. This is why the path is a gradual path, because it takes a while to develop the skills. After all, nibbana is very, very subtle. And even though it's immediately present, and the possibility of reaching it is theoretically available at any moment in time, our powers of perception are not up to it, our skills are not skillful

enough, not subtle enough.

So we have to raise the subtlety of our mind as we develop these skills until finally we reach the level where we can have that sudden awakening into the ultimate peace. The image the Buddha gives is of the continental shelf off of India, a gradual, gradual slope out and then, all of a sudden, a sharp drop. The reason the path has to be both gradual and sudden is because nibbana is both present and subtle.

So we have to gradually develop the subtlety of our minds so that we can then see, “Oh, it’s right here.” As the Buddha said, it’s something you touch with your body, see with your body. The synesthesia there is interesting. There’s no more division among the six senses. There’s just an awareness that’s outside of the six senses, but it’s known right where you had your sense of the body.

And that, he says, is the ultimate peace. It causes no harm to anyone. It’s a dimension of no objectification at all. Even the question of what happens to you when you reach that doesn’t occur anymore, because the “you” that you created as an object, or the world that you created as a place for objects, applies only as far as the six senses. The concept of there being nothing, no objects, also applies only as far as the six senses. When you move beyond the six senses, those concepts have no more meaning.

But right now we still live in the six senses. We’re still objectifying. So sometimes the Buddha would answer in an objectifying way the kinds of questions he ordinarily would not answer, such as, “What was I in the past? What am I going to be in the future?” Ordinarily he would put those questions aside. Yet there are occasional passages in the Canon where he talks to people about what they were in the past. But he speaks in ways that are designed to give rise to the sense of dispassion that comes with comprehension, i.e., you see that this really is a lot of suffering. Going through this process of samsara-ing is pretty miserable.

You’ve probably heard the comparison of all the water in the oceans as being less than the tears you’ve shed. Well, there’s a sutta where the comparison is even more dramatic. He says that all the blood you’ve lost by having your head cut off is greater than the water in the oceans. The water in the ocean is less than the tears you’ve shed, and it’s less than the blood you’ve lost. He goes through all the different ways you might have lost blood by having your head cut off—for example, when you were a cow, the number of times you’ve been a cow and have your cow’s head cut off—the amount of blood you’ve lost from just your cow lives is still greater than all the water in the oceans. The number of times you’ve been a sheep and had your sheep’s head cut off: the blood you lost then is greater than all the water in the oceans. And so on through different beings, different kinds of animals. Then he goes into the times that you were a thief and had your

head cut off, the times you were an adulterer or adulteress and had your head cut off. It's an awful lot of blood and it's an awful lot of miserable existences. Just thinking about the fact that you've been equipped with a cow's head that many times, or a sheep's head that many times, is overwhelmingly dismaying.

So he answers the question of what were you in a way that really does lead to dispassion, a comprehension of suffering—this is enough. The sutta states that all the monks who listened to that particular Dhamma talk all became arahants right away—because they saw that in objectifying yourself, these are the kinds of objects you come up with. You become a thief, you become a highway robber, you become an adulterer or adulteress, you become cows, sheep, goats, what not. There are constant opportunities to objectify yourself in really awful ways. There's constant conflict.

The Buddha's insight is that if you learn how to stop objectifying yourself, then you don't turn other people into objects. You can live with them with a lot greater peace. And once you find the peace of nibbana, you've found a happiness that doesn't require that anybody suffer at all.

So this is where we find the ultimate happiness, because it's also the ultimate peace. It's a gift not only to ourselves but also to everyone else, which is why this is such a good path to be on. There is some stress on this path, there are some difficulties in following this path; we haven't totally gotten to the place where we're not placing a burden on other people; and we have to make the effort to be as unburdensome as possible. The simple fact that we're here with a body that needs to be fed, clothed, sheltered, given medicine does place a weight on the world. So there's no real reason why we should want to come back even if we have altruistic reasons, for it still imposes a weight, a burden on other people just to maintain this body. So a happiness that doesn't require that kind of weight or that kind of burden is a very precious thing. And the path leading to that happiness and the peace that comes with it is precious as well.

Insight into Pain

June 5, 2010

Pain is a fact of consciousness. It's what distinguishes us from robots. Robots can have sensors, but they don't feel pain. It's our main subjective burden—which is why the Buddha's teachings are such a gift. There's a principle in postmodern thought that every attempt to teach people something is an act of aggression, because you're trying to make them submit to your view of things. But the Buddha's teachings are a huge exception to that. He didn't force anybody to accept his teachings. He offered his teachings as therapy. You can take them and use them, or you can put them aside, pay them no mind. He didn't need anyone's approval. He didn't need to exert power over anyone, because he had already found a true happiness that nothing could change. He simply offered his teachings as a gift to the one problem that everybody shares. Now it's true that we don't share one another's pain—I don't feel your pain, you don't feel mine. When a politician says, "I feel your pain," you wonder what he's feeling. But each of us knows what pain is like, and each of us wants a solution to it.

The Buddha says that the primary reaction to pain is twofold. One is bewilderment, not understanding where it comes from or why it's there. The second reaction is a search: Is there anyone who knows a way or two to get rid of this pain? Particularly with animals and young children who can't speak yet, there's not much comprehension. There's the sensation of pain, the definite feeling of pain, but there's a huge question that goes along with it: "Why, why, why? What is this? Why, why is this happening?" That's the bewilderment. As we begin to find that there are other people who can help assuage our pain—starting with our mother and father—we start looking outside. Some pains they can take care of, but a lot of pains they can't. So we look to other people beyond them.

The Buddha is there to fill in that gap, because bewilderment often leads to really mistaken ideas—looking to the wrong people, taking up the wrong ideas about how pain can be overcome. So the Buddha gives us his expert advice. He's like a doctor—but not one who simply gives us a shot and sends us home. He's like an old-fashioned herbal doctor who gives you a prescription. It's up to you to find the herbs, make them into medicine, and take it. And you have to adjust your life: avoiding certain foods, eating other foods, avoiding certain activities, exercising in certain ways. In other words, the actual treatment is up to you. The same with the Buddha: He's not going to take the pain away for you but he does tell you what you can do to overcome the suffering.

In particular, he talks about two kinds of pain, two kinds of suffering. There's the pain in the three characteristics and there's the pain or suffering in the four noble truths. The pain in the three characteristics is something universal. Wherever there's a process of fabrication where conditions come together to create other conditions, there's going to be stress: the stress inherent in the fact that things arise and pass away, the stress in the fact that their coming together contains tension and can't be permanent.

But that's not the suffering that weighs down the mind. The extent to which it does weigh down the mind comes from the fact that we have craving. The craving is what really weighs us down. That's the suffering, the pain in the four noble truths. That's the type we can do something about. It's optional suffering. And the path to put an end to that optional suffering is the noble eightfold path, or the threefold training: virtue, concentration, discernment.

Virtue here starts with our activities in terms of speech and physical activities. But it points to something really important in the mind: that those activities are based on our intentions. There are several purposes for this aspect of the practice. One is that if you harm others, it's going to be hard for you to practice. The karmic retribution creates difficulties. Then there's the regret you feel when you realize you've harmed yourself or somebody else. As the mind is trying to settle down in concentration, that becomes a thorn in the mind, making it hard to settle down. Training in virtue is a way of avoiding those difficulties.

But at the same time, training in virtue is also training in mindfulness, training in alertness, training in compassion, all of which are good qualities of mind you'll have to use in meditation. As you do this, you're getting very sensitive to your intentions because the intention is what determines whether you're breaking a precept or not. We go through life being so ignorant of our intentions and covering them up with denial, especially the unskillful ones. When you ask people why they did something, they often have to stop and think for a little while and reconstruct it. They weren't really there as the decisions were being made. So the precepts try to make you more and more present to your intentions, more sensitive to the results of your actions.

Then the same principle gets carried into the mind. When you're practicing concentration, you want to be very clear that this is an action, an activity you're engaged in. You're thinking and evaluating a single object. You're holding a single perception in mind. As the Buddha said, the levels of concentration are a series of perception attainments, all the way from the first jhana up through the dimension of nothingness. At each level, there's a perception you hold in your mind, a mental label you apply to your object. That's what keeps you in touch with the object, such as the breath. There are many things that you could be sensitive to in your awareness of the body right now, but the Buddha's asking

that you be sensitive to the dimension of breath energy: the in-and-out breath and the other breath energies in the body. You try to stay tuned to that level of awareness, that aspect of being sensitive to a physical body sitting here.

When the Buddha talks about being aware of the body, he's also getting you to be aware of the four properties: the wind property, the fire property, the water property, and the earth property. These are all aspects of how you sense the body from within. The wind is the energy or motion. Earth is the solidity, fire the warmth, and water the cool sensations that go with the flow of the blood through the body, for example. As you focus on those aspects of your body, you find that there are also feelings of pain or pleasure. It's important that you learn how to distinguish those feelings from the four properties, because otherwise they get glommed together, especially the earth, the solid aspect of the body. When there's a pain, you tend to glom it on with the solid sensations. That makes the pain seem solid and hard.

Here is an area where you can get some important insights into how perceptions can create problems. The perception of the pain has glued the pain to the solid sensations of the body, making the pain seem a lot more solid than it actually is. To see this, you have to stay concentrated, to stay with the sense of the body and not keep flying off to other mental worlds. Then, when you're solidly here, you can start making distinctions: which sensations are the earth sensations, which ones are the water, fire, breath, or wind? And then which sensations are the pain sensations? They're different things.

When you can see that distinction and learn how to apply different labels to those different sensations, you take a huge burden off the mind. Even though there may still be pain in the body, the mind doesn't have to be pained by it. You begin to see that the perception is the bridge between the physical pain and the sense of suffering or being burdened in the mind. How does this perception create craving? Because we lay claim to the body. The whole mass here is *us* or *ours*. As soon as pain comes in, our territory has been invaded. We sense the pain as aiming at us. It's trying to do something to us, trying to move in on our space.

But if you can practice holding different perceptions of what's going on, there can still be pain, but it's not invading your territory. When you're not trying to take possession of that territory, you're not opening yourself up to attack.

So that's another level of perception that you want to be able to distinguish: that when you're aware of something, you also tend to take possession of it. However, it's possible to be aware without having that sense of possession. Just as you're aware of the mountain over there on the horizon, the sun on the mountain, the trees, the chaparral: You look at them and you're aware of them, but there's no sense of possession. They're not yours. As long as mountains and

chaparral don't do anything to invade your space, there's no suffering.

But if you were to invade them, there would be. If you went out and tried to take possession of Mount Palomar or Mount Pala, there would be problems with the legal owners. But as long as you don't take possession of them, there's no problem. So learn how to apply that same principle to your sense of inhabiting the body. Your awareness can be here, the body can be here, but there doesn't have to be a *you* inhabiting it. There's just this sense of the body that you're aware of.

Now, to see the movements of the mind as it's applying these perceptions to things, creating the bridges that allow stress to come into the mind: That requires a lot of stillness, which is why the Buddha said that genuine insights really do require strong concentration. You can have insights about other things without much concentration—you see little movements in the mind here and there in a random kind of way, and draw interesting conclusions. But the insights that really go deep into the mind, that really have an important impact in freeing the mind, are the insights that come from seeing how you're trying to take control of something so you can gain pleasure out of it, but it turns around and it bites you. As in Ajaan Chah's image: the tail of the snake looks pretty, and the teeth are way on the other end, so we figure that it's safe to grab hold of the tail.

It's when you realize that the teeth and the tail are all part of the same body: Those are the insights that are really important, that make a big difference. For those you have to be very quiet because that movement of mind that tries to take over something so that you can feel that you're in control of it, convinced that it can lead you to happiness and pleasure: It's so instinctive, so under the radar. There's such an of-courseness about it—of course you'd think that this is your body, of course you'd feel this way, of course you'd have those perceptions—that it's really hard to catch.

This is an important aspect of insight: learning how to question the “of course,” learning to see things with new eyes, getting out of your old habits of looking and understanding, and then turning around to look at those old habits. “Oh my gosh, they really do cause a lot of unnecessary suffering and stress.”

So an important aspect of concentration practice is learning to get out of your old habits. Instead of thinking about things as you normally do or focusing on things as you normally would, try to hold onto your perception of the breath regardless. The mind may say, “This is stupid; you're not getting any insights,” but you can say, “Sorry, whether it's stupid or not, I don't care. I'm just going to keep on doing this.” You're here to learn something new. As the Buddha said, you're practicing to realize what you haven't realized before, to attain what you haven't attained before, and that means you have to do things you haven't done before.

So you stick with the breath regardless of how tempting it may be to go thinking about other things, focusing on other things. You stay right here, right here, right here. Develop the strength of mind that can stick with something regardless. The image Ajaan Fuang used was of a red ant. In Thailand they have big red ants that bite so tenaciously that if you try to pull them off, sometimes their heads detach before their jaws will let go. That, he said, is the kind of tenacity you want as you're sticking with the breath, because it rearranges priorities in the mind. The part of the mind that says, "I'm bored. I'd like to think about something else": You have to say No to it—"No, no, no, just stay right here."

In doing that, you get the mind out of its normal conversations, its normal ways of doing things and approaching things. Only when you get out of your normal ways can you turn around and look at your normal ways and get some perspective on them, to see that even though the pains of conditions are a normal part of the world, the suffering that the mind takes on is totally optional. It's because of our own lack of skill that we suffer.

So this is why discernment is so crucial for seeing the distinctions between things we otherwise glom together—glomming the pain onto the solid parts of the body, glomming some *me* onto that pain in the solid parts of the body—so that it's all a big, solid, sticky mess. When you learn how to distinguish things, make distinctions, see the differences—say, that a feeling of pleasure or pain is not the same thing as a sense of solidity, or that being aware of the body doesn't mean that you have to lay claim to the body—there can be a sense of separation between the mind and its object. When you can see these distinctions, that's how release comes.

After all, the threefold training is not the end of the story. The end of the story is the fourth of what the Buddha called the four noble dhammas: virtue, concentration, discernment, and release. These four noble dhammas give a more complete picture of what we're about here than you get from just the list of the triple training. We're here for release. You recognize discernment as genuine discernment by what it does: It brings release. You see something radically different, something you didn't see before. You understand something you didn't understand before, and in the understanding, there's a release from suffering. That's the kind of insight we're looking for. Other insights may be useful along the way, but you don't want to stop with them.

This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Fuang said not to go around memorizing your insights, because if the insight is genuine, it brings freedom right there. It does something. It's not just information. It's an insight that makes a difference, serves a purpose, accomplishes something. That's when the discernment is noble and leads to noble release.

Metta Means Goodwill

March 9, 2011

Every morning, every night here at the monastery, we repeat a metta chant, expressing goodwill, limitless goodwill, for ourselves and all other beings. And there's a reason why we do it so often. It's part of the motivation for why we practice. We want to find true happiness. We want to make sure that we act on the intention not to harm anyone in the course of finding that happiness. There are two reasons for wanting to keep this intention—a desire for harmless happiness—uppermost in our minds. The first is that if our happiness depends on somebody else's suffering, it's not going to last. They'll do what they can to destroy it. The second reason is the plain quality of sympathy: If you see someone suffering, it's painful. It's hard to feel happy when you know that that happiness is causing suffering for others.

But developing goodwill for everybody doesn't come naturally. It takes work because there are a lot of people out there who are doing hurtful, despicable things. It's hard to feel friendly toward them. So we have to sit down and think about why we might want to have goodwill for them.

First, we gave to understand the quality of goodwill itself. There are three places in the Canon where the Buddha recommends what you might call metta phrases—phrases for directing thoughts of goodwill. These are a good guide for gaining a clear idea of what metta means. One is that set we chant every day: “May all living beings be happy, free from stress and pain, free from animosity, free from oppression, free from trouble. May they look after themselves with ease.”

Notice that last statement: “May they look after themselves with ease.” We're not saying that we're going to be there for them all the time. And most beings would be happier knowing that they could depend on themselves rather than having to depend on others. I once heard a Dharma teacher say that he wouldn't want to live in a world where there was no suffering because then he wouldn't be able to express his compassion—which you think about it, is an extremely selfish wish. You need other people to suffer so you can feel good about expressing your compassion. The best attitude to have is, may all beings be happy. May they be able to look after themselves with ease. That way they can have the happiness of independence and self-reliance.

Another set of metta phrases is in the *Karaniya Metta Sutta*. They start out by

saying, “May all beings be happy at heart, whether they are long or short, big or little, strong or weak,” but then they go on to say, “May no one harm anyone else or despise anyone else or wish them harm.” In saying these phrases, you not only wish for beings to be happy, but you also wish that they avoid the actions that would lead to bad karma, to their own unhappiness. You honor the principle that happiness has to depend on action: For people to find true happiness, they have to understand the causes for happiness and act on them. So again, you’re not saying that you’re going to be there for them all the time. You’re hoping that people will wise up and be there for themselves.

The *Karaniya Metta Sutta* goes on to say, when you’re practicing this, you want to protect this attitude in the same way that a mother would protect her only child. Some people who misread that, thinking that they’re supposed to cherish all living beings the same way a mother would cherish her only child. But that’s not what the Buddha is saying. He’s saying that you try to protect your goodwill as a mother would protect her only child, looking after it all the time, making sure that it doesn’t waver. Because again, you don’t want to harm anybody. It’s usually during those waverings that the harm happens, so you do everything you can to protect this attitude. So, as the Buddha says toward the end of the sutta, you should stay determined to practice this form of mindfulness: the mindfulness of keeping in mind your wish that all beings be happy, to make sure that it always informs the motivation for everything you do.

Finally there’s another passage where the Buddha taught the monks a chant for spreading goodwill to all snakes and other creeping things. The story goes that a monk meditating in a forest was bitten by a snake and died. The monks reported this to the Buddha and he replied that if that monk had spread goodwill to all four great families of snakes, the snake wouldn’t have bitten him. Then the Buddha he teaches the monks the chant for expressing metta for all snakes—and not only for snakes, but also for all footless beings, two footed beings, four-footed beings, many footed beings. May all beings—whether they have no feet or two feet, or four feet or many feet—meet with happiness, may they be free from suffering. Then he goes through a list of all kinds of creeping things: rats, snakes, scorpions, lizards. May they all be happy. May they meet with good fortune. And may they go away. In other words, this expression of metta takes into consideration the truth that living together is often difficult, especially for beings of different species that can harm one another, and the happiest thing for both sides may often be to live apart.

Ajaan Fuang, my teacher, once discovered that a snake had moved into his room. So for three days they lived together. He was very careful not to startle the snake or make it feel threatened by his presence. But finally on the third day, as he was sitting in meditation, he addressed the snake quietly in his mind. He said,

“Look, it’s not that I don’t like you. I don’t have any bad feelings for you. But our minds work in different ways. It’d be very easy for there to be a misunderstanding between us. There are lots of places out in the woods where you can live without the uneasiness of living with me.” So he sat there, spreading goodwill to the snake, and the snake left.

These different ways of expressing goodwill show that goodwill is not necessarily the quality of lovingkindness. You’re not there to cherish these beings or to look after them. You wish them well, sometimes realizing that the best thing for everybody would be to live separately, with each of us understanding the causes for happiness and each being able to look after him or herself with ease. This is an attitude you can extend to everybody, regardless of how much you like or dislike them, or of how good or bad their current behavior. If we were told to love everybody and to want to be kind to everybody, to look after them, there are a lot of people out there that are pretty unlovable. The Buddha is not asking you to love them, just to wish them well: May they be happy. May they understand the causes for happiness. May they avoid the kind of behavior that causes suffering. May they look after themselves with ease. That way the whole world could be at peace.

Although these are good attitudes to develop at all times, the Buddha recommends two situations where they’re especially important to develop. One is when you’re being harmed by other people, or feeling threatened with harm. You try to develop an attitude of goodwill for those people and then, starting with them, you spread that attitude out to encompass the entire universe of beings. Try, the Buddha says, to make your mind as large as the River Ganges, or as large of the earth—in other words, larger than the harm they’re doing or threatening to do to you. May they be happy. May they stop causing suffering. May they stop suffering themselves. You’re taught to think in this way so that you don’t react in unskillful ways to their unskillful behavior.

Another time the Buddha recommends developing an attitude of infinite goodwill is when you realize that you’ve harmed others. You realize, he says, that getting tied up in remorse is not going to undo the harm. So remorse is no help. If you tie yourself up in remorse, it’s very easy for you to weaken yourself and as a result, end up doing harm to others again. So you simply note the fact that what you did was a mistake and then you wish that person well. Then you wish all beings well, as a way of helping to guarantee that you would never again intentionally try to cause harm. And then you have to act on that determination. You can’t just stop with that wish and then pretend that you’ve taken care of everything. You’ve got to look at the situations in which you live. You have to keep your thoughts of goodwill in mind. Where do you tend to cause harm? Is it through your words? Is it through your actions? How can you act in different

ways? How can you speak in different ways?

In other words, try to be a fair judge of your actions. If you see that your instinctive way of reacting to the situation is unskillful, sit down and ask yourself: What would be a more skillful way of handling the situation the next time it comes? This fits in with the Buddha's teachings on preventing unskillful states from arising. These are times when you really do have to think about the past and think about the future, i.e. where you've made a mistake in the past and what you can do in the future not to repeat it.

The same principle applies to observing the precepts. Once you know that you're not going to kill anything, you have to sit down and look at your house. How can you arrange things in your house so that you're not attracting ants, cockroaches, or whatever. Don't treat these pests as a surprise when they come. They are things you can anticipate. So it's a useful exercise to sit down and look at your life to figure out in what ways can you be less harmful. If situation X were to arise, how can you prepare yourself ahead of time so that you don't respond in your old unskillful ways?

This teaches you to be meticulous, scrupulous in following your wish for all beings to find happiness, true happiness. In other words, your goodwill, to be most effective both inside and out, can't be just a floating sort of general idea. You have to apply it to the nitty-gritty of all your interactions with others. This way your goodwill becomes honest. And it actually does have an impact, which is why we develop this attitude to begin with: to make sure that it actually does animate our thoughts, our words, and our deeds.

As the Buddha said, the development of goodwill is one of causes for true happiness, a happiness that's good for everybody. And that kind of happiness is really special. All too often, the pleasures of the world require that if somebody's gaining, other people have to lose. But with this cause for happiness, everybody gains.

So develop it as much as you can.

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