

Meditations3

Dhamma Talks

by

Thanissaro Bhikkhu
(Geoffrey DeGraff)

for free distribution

Copyright © Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2006

This book may be copied or reprinted *for free distribution*
without permission from the publisher.
Otherwise all rights reserved.

Contents

A Decent Education
The Grass at the Gate
Mental Experiments
Of Past & Future
Get Real
Sticking with an Intention
The Karma that Ends Karma
Analyzing the Breath
Immersed in the Body
Marshalling the Emotions
Good Humor
Suppressed Emotions
Resistance
Gladdening the Mind
Cherish Your Friends
Your Inner Mob
Mindstorms
The Story behind Impatience
Little Things
Nuclear Thinking
Stepping Back
Taking a Stance
Social Anxiety
The Mind's Song
Intelligent Equanimity
Intelligent Design
The Saints Don't Grieve
A Culture of Restraint
Self Esteem
The Middleness of the Path
Active Truth
No Preferences
Licking Yourself Clean
The End of Uncertainty
Habits of Perception

A Multilingual Mind
The Meaning of the Body
Pleasure & Pain
Investing Your Happiness
Things as They've Come to Be
Fabricating the Present
Standing Where the Buddha Stood
Battling Darkness
Perception
Strategies for Happiness
Freedom Undefined

Introduction

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

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

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

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

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Metta Forest Monastery
July, 2006

A Decent Education

May 18, 2005

If our education system were really designed for people, the core curriculum would teach how to live, how to die—how to deal with the big issues in life: pain, aging, illness, death, separation—because those are the things that plague people. The skills for dealing with them are the most important skills people can develop in life.

But one of the problems with our society is that everything is geared toward the economy. Laws are struck down because they're not good for the economy—at least for this quarter's profit margin. Educational systems are designed to fit us each into our slot in the economy. The skills we learn center on how to function economically. Then when we get too old to function, they put us out to pasture, and we're pretty much left to our own devices. And many of the skills we learned in order to be good members of the economy—good producers, good consumers—are actually bad for us as we get older. This producing and consuming self we have is an especially big problem.

So as we come here to meditate—which is practice in learning how to live and how to die—this producing and consuming self is one of the big issues we have to face down. What does it consume? Feelings of pleasure and feelings of pain. It tries to produce more and more pleasure but often ends up producing more and more pain. When you look at your sense of who you are, it comes down to these two things: the producer and the consumer. These are the habits you have to observe. When you meditate, the first thing you learn is how to produce pleasure in the present moment—not for the sake of the pleasure in and of itself, but to use it as a strategy. Often we regard pleasure as an end in and of itself, but the Buddha says, No. You use pleasure and pain—both of them—as means to a higher end.

How do you use pleasure? Focus on the breath right now and see how it feels. Then experiment with the breath to see how the way you breathe can produce either pleasure or pain. It may be subtle—the difference between the two—but it's there. We've learned to desensitize ourselves to this aspect of our awareness, so it's going to take a while to re-sensitize ourselves, to begin seeing the patterns. This is why we practice. Keep coming back to the breath, coming back to the breath. Try to get more sensitive to this area of your awareness, more skilled at learning how to maximize the potential for pleasure right here and now, simply by the way you breathe—not only producing pleasure but also maintaining it.

After all, feelings of pleasure and rapture are part of the path. They're tucked in the noble eightfold path under Right Concentration. And as part of the path, they have to be developed and maintained. As the Buddha said, this pleasure is blameless.

It's also useful because you can use it to examine any pain that may be in other parts of the body. When you sit here it's sometimes difficult to get the whole body saturated in pleasure. There may be parts that you can't make pleasurable so, as Ajaan Lee says, don't lie down there. It's like knowing that there are rotten floorboards in your house. If you try to lie down on the rotten part of the floor, you're going to fall through to the basement. So lie down where the boards are sound.

As the pleasure you're relying on gets more and more solid, you've got a good vantage point for looking at pain. And hopefully by now the meditation has taught you to be inquisitive: You've been learning about the breath, about the parts of the body that you can adjust to your liking, so how about these other parts that you can't adjust as you like? What's going on there? Is the problem related to the breath energy? That's one way you can deal with it. Think of breathing through the pain. See what that does. Or you can notice how you label the pain. There may be a mental image to go along with it. Try dropping the image or changing the image, and see what's left.

In other words, develop an inquisitive attitude toward pain. Put yourself in a position where you don't feel threatened by pain so that you can probe the pain and ask questions, watch and observe and learn about it. Get so that pain holds no mysteries for you, holds no fear, because you understand not only the sensation of pain but also how the mind can latch onto it and create problems around it.

Then you learn to abstain from those ways of latching on. It's like knowing that when you stick your finger into a flame it's going to burn, so you stop sticking your fingers into flames. As you learn to abstain from unskillful ways of thinking about pain, you learn more and more about the mind, more and more about ways of not getting yourself involved in suffering. You start out with little tiny pains, little tiny disturbances, but once you've figured them out you get more interested: "How about the bigger ones?"

This is one of the most important parts of the practice: this willingness to rise to a challenge, this courage that's not overwhelmed by things. You've seen people who suffer in their lives and all they can think about is, "This isn't going right, that isn't going right, people don't sympathize with me." They do nothing but pile more suffering onto the original suffering. When they see a difficult challenge, they just faint. They whine and complain. But that's not the Buddha's

way. His way is to give you the skills, the tools you need, and then to encourage you, to fire your imagination to rise to these challenges.

Your tools are the meditation instructions. Your encouragement comes from the examples set by the Buddha's life, the stories of the noble disciples. They show how, when you find yourself in a difficult situation, you can rise above it using your wits, your grit, the resources you've got.

So here we are with our breath. Sometimes we've also got pain, and at other times distractions—sometimes both together—and we tend to regard them as mosquitoes swarming around as we meditate. We'd like to swat them and get rid of them so we can actually get down to the real business of meditating. But dealing with the distractions, dealing with the pain: That *is* the real business of the meditation. When you die, the big problems are going to be distraction and pain.

Even before you die. You've probably noticed this with old people: They can't look ahead into the future because all they see in the future is death. So they start looking only to the past. They cut off large swaths of their awareness. Their minds can't accept what's actually happening—and if they haven't been trained, then the pain and depression of having to face death overwhelm them. When the actual pain of illness and death comes, they're even more overwhelmed because they have no tools. They don't have the right attitude for dealing with these things.

But if you're practicing meditation, you're dealing precisely with the big issues that are going to cause suffering as you die. The more skilled you get at the meditation, the more you'll be ready for whatever comes, and the more you'll have the right attitude toward it. You see it as just one more challenge, and you're up for it. You've got your tools. When illness comes, you can deal with it lucidly. When death comes, you can deal with it lucidly, with a sense of confidence. You've dealt with pain and distraction in the past, so the basic principles are the same.

For this reason, when things like pain and distraction come up in the meditation, don't get discouraged. These are the riddles of the meditation, these are the things you want to figure out—how to spar and parry, how to sidestep when necessary, how to take them straight on when you have to. Don't get discouraged by how big the task is. Just keep chipping away, chipping away. This is another thing we don't learn from our education system: how to deal with something we're not good at from the very beginning. Often they channel you into areas where you show a talent, and neglect to teach you how to gain skill in areas that don't come to you easily. As a result, when you come to meditation you need to develop the basic skills needed to deal with a long-term project:

Keep chipping away, chipping away, step by step. Learn to look for the least little signs of progress so you can give yourself encouragement.

And take things as they come. The world doesn't always throw things at you step by step. Sometimes big pains come, and then little pains, and then big pains again. But you do what you can. And don't forget that every step you take in the right direction, big or small, is an important step. It's not wasted.

So don't go for the easy way out, saying, "I'm just here to hang out in the present moment and enjoy the present moment, and who cares about striving for something large?" Many modern meditation teachers claim that the secret to good meditation is to stop trying, to stop striving—that by striving you only pile more suffering on yourself and place obstacles in your way, so the best thing is just to let go and appreciate the way things are. People who denigrate striving, saying that it did nothing for them, forget to think that maybe they were striving in the wrong way. As in the sutta where the Buddha compares the right path and the wrong path: If you practice with Wrong View, Wrong Resolve, and Wrong Effort, he says, it's like trying to squeeze gravel to get sesame oil.

Many meditators are squeezing gravel to get sesame oil. Then they realize that this doesn't work and so they stop squeezing the gravel—and that's where they stop. They celebrate how great it is to stop squeezing gravel, thinking that that's the secret to good practice. Well, it's an important step, but the path actually consists of finding sesame seeds and squeezing them. It may take some effort but at least it produces real results.

So if you find yourself pushing, pushing, pushing and nothing's coming from it, ask yourself, "Am I squeezing gravel to get sesame oil?" In which case you'd better back up a little bit, take stock of your practice, and do what you can to get back on the right path. Don't think that just giving up on the effort is going to be a solution. The solution lies in learning how to apply the effort skillfully and learning how to read the results of your actions until you get what you're looking for. This requires not only seeing the connection between your actions and their results, but also having the imagination to realize that to stop squeezing gravel is not the only alternative. There *is* the alternative of finding sesame seeds and squeezing sesame seeds. That way you get the oil.

And the oil is really priceless. After all, it's the Deathless. Once you touch that in your meditation, you have your safe place, you have your secure place. It doesn't have to be fabricated. It doesn't have to be protected. It's *there*, and it will always be there for you to tap into when you really need it. So finding that oil is the most important skill you can develop.

This gives the most satisfying narrative to your life. The narrative of most people's lives is—what? They were born, they struggled, they went through all sorts of difficulties, and then got sick and died. If they were lucky maybe they

got to do some good things for their fellow human beings, but then they still just grew sick and died. But if you touch the Deathless, that's a very different narrative, the narrative of a life that genuinely accomplished something, a life well lived. If you don't touch the Deathless, the question at the end of your life is, "What was that all about? What was accomplished by all that producing and consuming, all that struggle?" Whatever you do in time and space is going to get changed someday, like a picture you draw with a stick in flowing water. But if you touch something outside of time and space, then life hasn't been wasted. The narrative arc is really satisfying—because once you've found the Deathless it's always there to depend on. You always have something to show for your efforts.

And that's the most important thing you'll ever need to know.

The Grass at the Gate

July 27, 2004

Ajaan Fuang once said that a lot of the practice is found in the grass at the gate to the cattle pen—the image being that when you open the gate to the cattle pen, the cattle go rushing out looking for grass someplace else. Usually there’s a little bit of grass right next to the posts of the gate, but most of the cattle miss it.

It’s the same with us. When we look for happiness, we tend to look far away. Even when we’re meditating, we tend to look far away from where things actually are. Everything we need to know, the Buddha says, lies in this fathom-long body with awareness.

We sometimes think that Buddhism has a negative take on the body, especially early Buddhism, but it has more of what you’d call a balanced take. Like the chant just now: It isn’t lying when it says that the body is filled with all sorts of unclean things—your liver, kidneys, spleen, your intestines, the contents of your intestines. If you took them out and put them on the floor, we’d have to clean up the mess right away. If you put them in nice platters on the table, people would run away in disgust. The only reason we don’t go running away from these things is because they’re tucked inside right now, so they seem presentable. The purpose of the chant is to give you a sense of detachment from your desire, from your lust, from your attachment to the body as something that constantly has to be pandered to.

Once you have that element of detachment, then you can look at the body and see, “What does it have of a positive nature?” Buddhism talks about that, too. There’s a potential for rapture right here, a potential for ease—all associated with the breath. Many times when we read the descriptions of Right Concentration it seems far away, but everything we need is right here.

When Ajaan Lee talks about comfortable breath sensations and uncomfortable ones, we already have comfortable breath sensations in at least *some* parts of the body. There’s already the potential for a sense of fullness, a sense of ease in different parts of the body. It’s simply a matter of applying our directed thought and evaluation. What that means is that we locate these potentials and then work with them for a while. The “working” here many times is simply a matter of protecting them. The word Ajaan Fuang used is “*prakhawng*,” which means you hover around something to make sure that it’s okay, that nothing happens to it.

It's like trying to start a fire on a windy day. You have to cup your hands around the little tiny flame you begin with, to make sure that the wind doesn't blow it out, until finally it catches and starts to spread and finally reaches a point when it's strong enough that you don't have to cup it any more. So you might want to try a little exercise in how to locate that sense of ease in the body and let it develop.

Pay attention to your feet and your hands. Where are they right now? How do they feel? Tense? If they feel tense, relax them. Go through them finger by finger, toe by toe, through the palms of the hands, the backs of the hands, the soles of the feet, the tops of the feet, relaxing all the little spots of tension you find.

You might begin to notice that sometimes, as you breathe in, there's a slight tensing—either in your hands or in your feet, maybe the back of your hands or in your fingers. See if you can breathe in and out without the tensing. Just keep both hands, both feet as relaxed as possible—all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. Notice where in the breath cycle there's a little bit of tensing. Allow it to relax. Get so that you can maintain that sense of relaxation all the way through the in-breath, through the space between the in-breath and the out-breath, all the way through the out-breath, and then through the space between the out-breath and the next in-breath. Keep that sense of relaxation as constant as you can. No matter how the breath is cycling through the rest of the body, keep the sense of relaxation in your feet and your hands as steady as possible.

It doesn't have to be an enormous relaxation, just enough for you to know that it's more relaxed than before. One way of checking it is to compare one hand to the other, one foot to the other. See which one is more tense and then allow it to relax as much as the other one. Sometimes you find that as you relax the feet and the hands, you set off patterns of relaxation through the rest of the body too—up the arms to the neck, up the legs to the small of the back. Allow that to happen, but don't lose your focus on the feet and the hands. Just let that sense of relaxation spread and keep watch over its source.

The focusing on the sensation here is directed thought. Watching over it, protecting it, is evaluation. Staying consistently with the relaxed sensation is singleness of preoccupation. And in that relaxed sensation there's the potential both for ease and for rapture to develop. So you've got the potential for all five factors of the first jhana. They tend to grow stronger if they're allowed to be continuous. There's a cumulative effect.

And that's all you have to do. It's right there. It's very simple, but we tend to make things too difficult for ourselves. We complicate things when we don't really have to. So keep your directed thought and evaluation uncomplicated. Just

work on being steadily vigilant right here. And that's it: the grass at the gate to the cattle pen.

Mental Experiments

October 14, 2005

Meditation is like running a series of experiments in the mind, trying to see what happens when you focus it on one thing for long periods of time, trying to see what happens when you really take seriously the idea that the way you use your mind may be causing unnecessary suffering. So you want to see clearly what you're doing, where the suffering is, and what you can change. This is why it's important that you get accurate results from the experiment.

And as with any experiment, one of the most basic things—in fact it's so basic that we hardly even think about it—is that you don't want the scientists to be starving. If they're starving, they'll eat up the endowment before it even gets to the experiment. Or they'll fudge the findings to get quick results so that they can print them and make a name for themselves. Or if they're really starving—say the experiment involves feeding bananas to apes—the scientists will eat up the bananas first. They'll never get to the apes.

What this means is that, as a meditator, you have to come to the meditation with a sense of wellbeing. This is why the path doesn't begin with meditation. It begins with generosity and virtue, because generosity and virtue help you gain a sense of self esteem. When you're generous, you see the good that comes from being able to give things away. That, in and of itself, gives the mind a sense of wealth. Generosity is one of the forms of noble wealth. It gives the mind a sense of contentment. You're not constantly gobbling up your profits. You take part of the profits and share the rest. That provides a different kind of wealth inside.

The same with virtue: You see the things you could do that might give you an immediate advantage over somebody else, but you realize that you'd rather not do them because they're harmful—not only to the other person, but also to yourself. As you learn to say No to yourself more and more consistently in situations like that, you can begin to trust yourself. As your precepts gets tested in more and more difficult situations, you gain a greater and greater sense of their worth. If someone were to offer you a thousand dollars to lie, you realize you have a precept that's worth more than a thousand dollars. If they offer a million dollars, you still can say No. You've got a precept worth more than a million.

And you learn a lot of other skills as well in the course of practicing generosity and virtue. For one thing, you learn deferred gratification, realizing that there are solid pleasures to be gained from putting aside or forgoing quick

and easy pleasures that end quickly and easily as well. As you find yourself able to forgo the easy pleasures, you gain a sense of responsibility, a sense of self-worth, a sense that you can trust yourself. This translates into a sense of inner wealth, inner wellbeing.

This is what you want to bring to the meditation, so that you can watch what's happening in the mind with a sense of dispassion. Bad things come up in the meditation and you don't get worked up over them; good things come up and you don't grab at them. You can watch them, instead of saying, "Wow, this must be something really great!" and trying to grab them only to find that they're already gone.

It's like a woman I once knew in Thailand. She lived down the road from the monastery but was new to meditation. I'd gotten to know her over time, and had noticed that she was pretty mercenary. And sure enough, one day as she was sitting and meditating, she reached out in front of her, grabbed the air, and fell over. Later she admitted very sheepishly that she had seen a vision of a golden tray floating right in front of her, and she wanted it. This is what happens when you meditate with a sense of hunger. You grab at everything that comes by and it just slips through your fingers. You destroy whatever it was.

So. Try to come with a sense of wealth, that you're not hungry for things, so that when something good comes up you can just watch it for a while, and say "What is this? Is this really good or not?" If you can develop the patience to watch things, then you begin to get a better sense of what's worthwhile. When something really good does come along, you can just watch it for a while and not try to gobble it up right away.

Even when you can maintain a particular state of ease or rapture, you don't want to start jumping to conclusions about it. That's like the scientists who get a few results from their experiments and then are in a great hurry to publish them so that they can make a name for themselves. If you're wise when something comes up in the meditation, you're not too quick to interpret it. You just watch it for a while to see what happens, to see what it does. What good does it do for the mind? This is what makes all the good things in the meditation good: They do good things for you. We're not here to hoard up the jhanas the way you'd hoard up houses on Baltic or Ventnor. When something comes, just watch it for a while, see what it does. How is it useful in the practice?

Ajaan Fuang once pointed out that even states of Wrong Concentration can be useful if you know how to use them. For instance, you can get yourself in states of concentration where you totally lose any sense of the body—and here I mean *strong* states of concentration, not that kind of floating, deluded concentration where you just lose your bearings. I'm talking about the state of non-perception, where you really focus on a very minute spot and refuse to deal with anything

that comes in through any of the senses. As a result, you can totally blank yourself out. You lose the sense of the body, you can't even hear anything, and you can stay there for long periods of time. If you make up your mind beforehand that you're going to stay for two hours, you'll stay for two hours and then come out right on target. Two hours will seem like two minutes. It's Wrong Concentration because there's no way you're going to be able to develop any insight while you're in that state. But it has its uses. As Ajaan Fuang told me, he once had to go into surgery. They were going to remove a kidney, but he didn't trust the anesthesiologist so he put himself in this state so that, no matter what happened, he wouldn't have to suffer pain.

So even Wrong Concentration can have its uses. All the more so with Right Concentration. But even Right Concentration, as I said, is not an end in and of itself. It's part of the path. And the path is worthwhile because it takes you to where you want to go.

So whatever comes up in the mind, just put a post-it note on it, saying "This seems to be x ." Then watch it for a while, to see what x does. Maybe after a while, as you get more and more familiar with the territory of the mind, you have to shift the post-it notes around. But you haven't lost anything because you've learned what these states are useful for.

This is why you want to come to the meditation with a sense of wellbeing. Try to keep the mind on an even keel, so that no matter what happens, good or bad, the mind doesn't have to zoom up with the good things or crash down with the bad. You simply watch. If the mind is centered, you can ask yourself, "This seems good. Where did it come from? Where is it going to go?" If the mind is scattered, ask yourself, "Where did this come from?" Try to trace it out. Try to understand what's happening in terms of cause and effect. This requires that the mood not take total possession of your mind. Try to maintain a sense of the observer that's just watching the mood come and go. Of course, that observer itself will have its own mood, which is a mood of patience, a mood of wellbeing, but also a sense of urgency: This is important work that we're doing here—we don't want to suffer.

So it's important that you strike the right balance. You want accurate results. Sometimes that takes time, so you're willing to take time—the idea being that when you finally publish your results they really are worthwhile, they really are dependable, rather than being just a flash in the pan.

This requires that you bring a sense of contentment, a sense of wellbeing to the meditation. Develop attitudes of generosity, virtue, and self-restraint. Practice them in your daily life. And try to get a keen sense for the rewards that come: the sense of wellbeing and inner wealth that comes when you know that you can give things away, that you can abstain from what you know to be

harmful actions. No matter how much you'd like to do something harmful, you just don't do it, and in that way you build up a sense of inner worth and inner wealth.

This puts you in a position where, as you watch your mind in the course of the meditation, you're really going to see what's happening. You're not going to eat up the endowment; you're not going to eat up the bananas before they can get to the apes. You're going to wait until your results are solid and sure before you try to publish anything. That's when the experiment really will be a gift of knowledge, both to yourself and to everybody else.

Of Past & Future

September 18, 2003

I don't know how many times I've started a Dhamma talk by saying, "Don't listen to the Dhamma talk. Focus your attention on the breath. The talk is here to be a fence to direct you back to the present moment, direct you back to the breath in case you wander off." The reason I say that is because that's how the Dhamma functions as a whole. It's meant to point you back to your mind in the present moment, to what you're doing in the present moment, where you can relate things to the present moment—that's when you're using the Dhamma the correct way. When you find that the talk carries you off into speculation, you're using it in the wrong way. The Dhamma is meant to function as a set of tools to apply to the present moment. You're not here simply to *be* here. You want to understand *why* you're here, what you're doing here, what's the best thing to be doing here. When the Dhamma talks about the past or the future, it's meant to catch you if you've wandered off into the past or the future, and to bring you back—not only to bring you back to the present, but also to give you a perspective on what you're doing here.

For instance, the teachings on karma: Every time the Buddha talked about cycles of past lives or the general direction of the universe in the future, he ended up by saying that it all comes down to what people do, that karma is what has fashioned the past, will fashion the future. And where is karma being made? Right here, right now. What is karma? Intention. That's the action being performed in the present moment. So you want to look at your intentions. The best way to do that is to meditate.

As for the future we're shaping, think about the past you've shaped with all your past actions. What are the things you've regretted most? Sometimes you might think that you regret something that somebody else did, but the things that really burn inside are the harmful things *you* did. And they burn especially when you did them even though you knew they'd be harmful. Why did you do them? Because you weren't very alert, weren't very mindful. You let defilement take over the mind. How are you going to prevent yourself from doing that in the future? By developing mindfulness, developing alertness. Where do you do that? Right here, right now. So if you're concerned about the future, remember that if you take care of the powers of the mind here in the present moment, those powers will enable you to handle the future well when it comes. So the teachings related to past and future—particularly the teachings on karma—are designed to

bring you back into the present moment and to give you an understanding of why you're here. You're not just hanging out in the present moment because it's a wonderful place to stay. You're not here passively; you're actually doing something here all the time. And what you're doing is important.

So you want to do something skillful. The Buddha talks about Right Effort: the things you should abandon, the things you should prevent, the things you should give rise to, the things you should maintain and develop. He also talks about the four noble truths, and each of them has a duty. With stress and suffering, your duty is to comprehend it. If you happen to run into some suffering here in the present moment, try to comprehend it. If you run into any craving, recognize that that's the cause for suffering. Do what you can to abandon it, to undercut the ignorance that makes it unskillful. As for the factors of the path—concentration, mindfulness, alertness—develop those. If you see any moments where craving disbands, try to be very clear about how that happens—whether it's simply one craving taking over another one or if there's actually a moment when craving stops and nothing takes its place. Look into that. Make it clear. As for the right efforts or the right exertions I mentioned just now, their purpose is to give rise to skillful qualities—like the qualities of the path—and then to maintain them. The preventing and the abandoning apply to the cause of suffering.

So the Buddha's instructions are very clear. They tell you what to do. But they don't simply say, "Do this and don't think about *why*." They give you the reasons, so that you understand why you're here in the present moment, why you're doing what you're doing. When you understand that much, you understand the purpose of the Dhamma. When you use the Dhamma for that purpose, you're using it properly: to come into the present moment and to sort out what's going on right here, and particularly to understand what your intentions are doing.

So don't be worried if you don't know a lot about the Dhamma or don't understand it all. Understand enough to bring the mind to stillness. Understand enough to bring the mind to the present moment, to watch what it's doing, to do it skillfully, to be mindful, alert, right here. If you find yourself wandering off, try to keep it as short a wander as possible. If the mind is persistent and constantly going back to the past or worrying about the future, keep reminding yourself of the lessons that the Dhamma has to teach about how to relate to the past and the future.

The only really beneficial use for the past is to remember your mistakes and to resolve not to repeat them, to remember what you did well and see if it applies right now. As for the future, its main use is to remind yourself that you don't know how much future time you have left in this particular lifetime. Notice how

the Buddha teaches recollection of death: It's not just keeping "Death, death, death, death, death..." in mind. The proper reflection is, "If I had just one more breath, I could make good use of it." So where does that reflection focus you? On the present moment. You *do* have this one more breath, so make good use of it. Have a sense of the value of each breath as it comes in, each breath as it goes out. Have a sense of the importance of the present moment. The opportunities are here in the present moment for performing the duties appropriate to the four noble truths, for mastering Right Exertion or mastering Right Effort. That's all you really need to know. If you want your understanding of those teachings to get more refined, the present moment is the place to look more carefully.

Think about the Buddha on the night of his Awakening. His first knowledge was recollection of past lives, but that wasn't Awakening. Still, it did inspire the question: Did this pattern apply just to him or to everybody? And what's the factor that determines whether a life is going to be happy or sad, comfortable or not? In the second knowledge he applied his powers of concentration to that question and discovered that the principle of rebirth applies to everybody. He also found that actions performed with Right View — skillful intentions influenced by Right View, the view that your actions are important — are the things that led to happy lifetimes. Unskillful intentions performed from Wrong Views lead to suffering.

But then the Buddha did something very unusual. He applied that insight to the present moment: What do all these lessons have to do with the present moment? That's where the third knowledge came in. He focused on the immediate present, on the questions of stress and suffering right here and now, the causes for those things as they appear right here and now. In other words, he focused on his actions, his intentions, in the present moment, along with the stress and suffering occurring right there in the present moment. And the mental activities that led him beyond the suffering, to transcend suffering: Those were all right there in that moment, too. It was because he looked at the present moment in that way that he was able to break through to something else, something that can be touched right here in your awareness of the present, but lies beyond it.

So learn to use the Dhamma in a way that keeps bringing you back, bringing you back to what you're doing right here, right now, with the determination to do it skillfully, with alertness, with mindfulness. If you have any doubts about why you're here, reflect on what the Dhamma teaches: that what you're doing right here is useful. Very useful, both for you and for the people around you. A lot of people accuse meditators of simply running away from things, but we're not running away. We're running *to* the source of all things right here. We're accused of doing something totally useless to other people. Well, no it's not:

We're getting rid of greed, anger, and delusion right here. This benefits not only ourselves, but also everyone around us. That's our purpose for being here.

And it's an important purpose. It's the most important thing we can do with our lives: the sort of thing that if it demands great sacrifices, we should be willing to make them. As the Buddha once said, even if your practice of the holy life brings tears bathing your cheeks in sorrow, frustration, and despair, you should *stick with it*. That's much better than giving up. This is the best use of your life. The Dhamma is there to remind you of that.

So we're not just hanging out here in the present moment, grooving on or blissing out in the present moment—although there may be bliss. That's not all that we're here for. We're here for something more important than that. The teachings on the past or the future—all the teachings of the Dhamma—are here to remind us of that, to give us the incentive to stick with the present moment, to watch the present moment, to work with the present moment, to parse it out and see which part of our experience is the result of past karma, which is the actual karma we're doing right now, which is the result of the karma we're doing right now. And our experimental laboratory is the breath right here.

So here you are: right at the breath. You're where you should be. You're at the best place you can be right now, the most useful place you can be right now. So make the most of this opportunity.

Get Real

October 4, 2003

When you come to practice meditation, tell yourself that you've left all your baggage at the door. You don't have to carry it in here. All of your thoughts about what you've done today, what you're going to do tomorrow, anything past or future: Tell yourself that those things aren't relevant right now.

What's relevant is what you're immediately sensing right now. And what is there? There's the sensation of the body and the sensation of the breath coming in and going out. As for the other sense doors, you can close them down. Your eyes are closed; you can even close your ears. You don't have to listen to the Dhamma talk. As I've said many times before, the Dhamma talk is here as a fence. If you leave the breath, you run into the fence. Go back to the breath. Don't let the talk interfere with your breathing. Allow the body to relax.

Ajaan Suwat once noted that there's a paradox in what we're trying to develop as we get the mind to settle down. On the one hand, the texts talk about making the mind soft and malleable. On the other hand, they talk about making it strong—strong in the sense that you're not going to get waylaid by other thoughts. You're going to stay focused right here on the breath, focused right here on the immediate sensation of the body no matter what else happens. Try to elaborate that as little as possible. Stay just with the direct sensation: the breath coming in, the breath going out. You feel it right here, and you feel the different sensations in the body that let you know where your legs are, where your arms are, where your head is. Don't try to fill in anything more than what you actually sense. That's a good exercise in self-honesty right there.

Ordinarily we bring a lot of ideas into the present moment: perceptions about the shape of the body, about how we should breathe, about where we should be feeling the sensation of the breathing. If you really look, though, you see how fabricated those ideas are. If you let them go, what have you got left? Explore. When you do, you find things softening up a bit. A lot of the tension with which you hold the body to make it fit in with your preconceived notions of what you *should* be feeling right now, gets put aside. As you allow yourself to become more and more sensitive to what you're feeling, the tension in the body can begin to relax. You're not here trying to prove anything or to force anything. You're here to explore: What have you got right here right now?

If there's a sensation of tension or tightness in any part of the body, allow it to disperse. You can think of the breath as a means of clearing out that tension. In

other words, you breathe through it as you breathe in, and you allow it to go out with the breath, or simply to dissolve, as you breathe out. As you let go of the tension in the body, your sense of the body here in the present moment, your sense of awareness here in the present moment, begins to open up. That's the softness, the malleability, that we're aiming for in the state of concentration.

As for the strength, that lies in not allowing yourself to get waylaid. Other thoughts are going to come in. That's something you can expect to happen, so don't get worked up about it. The trick lies in letting them go right through you. Think of your awareness of the body as a big window screen, with lots of little holes. They're porous. When a sound comes in, when a thought comes in, whatever comes in, just let it go right through. You don't have to catch it, just as a screen doesn't catch the wind. This way you can combine that sense of being tender, softened up, more malleable, with the strength. The strength lies in the wires in the screen, in that they don't get blown away by what's coming through. The softness lies in the holes, in the porous nature of your awareness that allows things through.

When the breath comes in and goes out, it can come in and go out anywhere in the body at all. So experiment and explore to see how that feels. What breathing feels best right now? Look into it. There's long breathing, slow breathing, fast breathing, short breathing, hot, cool and warm breathing—like the porridge in the story of Goldilocks. You have all kinds of choices, but what you want is the one that's just right. You're not trying to program yourself or force yourself into a particular mold. The recommendations of the technique are there to give you guidance in your exploration, to give you a sense of direction in what you're doing. But the things you're going to see depend on your own powers of observation as you adjust the breath, as you adjust your focus.

That act of adjusting is the beginning of discernment. You begin to see connections: cause and effect. When you choose to breathe in a certain way, certain sensations are going to result, either pleasurable or painful. That's the law of karma right there: seeing how things arise and pass away, seeing the *connections* between what you do and the feelings that arise and pass away as a result.

When the texts describe the insight that leads to the first stage of Awakening, they express it as seeing this: *All that's subject to origination is subject to cessation.* That's an insight both into change and into causal connections underlying change. The Pali word for "origination," *samudaya*, refers to the way things arise together with their causes. As you go deeper into the meditation, this insight grows deeper and becomes more all-encompassing, but it starts with precisely this act of adjusting: changing your perceptions and intentions a little bit here, a little bit there, seeing what feelings result, and trying to be observant as possible,

as sensitive as possible, to what's really happening, to what's connected with what.

This is why you're told not to force the breath, but to allow it to come in and go out comfortably and then to monitor it to see what feels best. Learn to listen to things as they come into being. This was characteristic of the Buddha as he sought Awakening: to see things as they come into being. He didn't try blindly to force things in line with a lot of preconceived notions. He was more of an explorer, trying different approaches and seeing what results came about. Ultimately he found what worked best in the sense of putting an end to all suffering and then recommended that method for us to follow. He set out all the basic principles but left the details for us to observe for ourselves in our laboratory right here: the body sitting here, breathing in and out.

In other words, we're sitting here trying to follow his method, not just trying to clone the results. We follow the method he proposed for learning the truths that lie within us. But to get the best results requires developing your own sensitivity, your own awareness, and seeing what precisely, really, is there.

Recently I've been looking through a field guide on nature observation. The author, when he was a child, was trained by an old Native American. One day the child asked the old man, "Why is it that you're not afraid of heat and cold?"

The old man looked at him for a while and finally said, "Because they're real."

And this is our job as meditators: to try to learn not to be afraid of things that are real.

Ultimately, we discover that things that are real pose no danger to the mind. The real dangers in the mind are our delusions, the things we make up, the things we use to cover up reality, the stories, the preconceived notions we impose on things. When we're trying to live in those stories and notions, reality is threatening. It's always exposing the cracks in our ideas, the cracks in our ignorance, the cracks in our desires. As long as we identify with those make-believe desires, we find that threatening. But if we learn to become real people ourselves, then reality poses no dangers.

This is what the meditation is for, teaching yourself how to be real, to get in touch with what's really going on, to look at your sense of who you are and take it apart in terms of what it really is, to look at the things that you find threatening in your life and see what they really are. When you really look, you see the truth. *If you're true in your looking, the truth appears.*

This is an important principle in the practice. This is why the Dhamma is so precious. Only people who are true can see the truth. Truth is a quality of the mind that doesn't depend on figuring things out or being clever. It depends on having integrity in your actions and in your powers of observation, accepting the

truth as it is. It means accepting the fact that you play a role in shaping that truth, so you have to be responsible. You have to be sensitive both to what you're doing and to the results you get, so that you can learn to be more and more skillful.

Many people think that self-acceptance means celebrating what's there already: that you're good enough, that you don't have to make any changes. That's not the case at all. Acceptance means accepting the fact that you're responsible for a lot of your experience right now. You can't blame anybody else. And ultimately that's a good thing. If other people were ultimately responsible for shaping your experience, what could you do? You'd have to go around pleasing them all the time. But the key fact is that you're shaping your pleasures and pains here in the present moment. Some of your experience comes from past actions, but a lot comes from the way you shape things with each present intention.

So learn to be open and honest about the role you're playing in this moment. That way the meditation leads to greater and greater sensitivity into precisely this—what you're doing right now—and into the fact that if you were really observant you'd be a lot more sensitive in shaping your experience. There'd be a lot less suffering. In fact, you could ultimately get to the point where you put no suffering into your experience at all. That's how far the skill can go. It requires that you be true in your observation, both admitting what you're doing to yourself and admitting the results that come, at the same time using your ingenuity to figure out how to do things better.

So this is where those qualities of sensitivity or tenderness on the one hand, and strength on the other hand, come together. The sensitivity lies in allowing yourself to see really refined things; the strength, in admitting the truth for what it is. It's in this area that the ignorance leading to suffering lies: in our inability to be true to ourselves. But, as the old man's statement implied, if you're true, the truth isn't threatening. If you learn to be a real person then reality doesn't hold any dangers, doesn't hold any fears.

If you're still living in worlds that are false and made up, though, then reality poses a threat. Only when you strip away all the unreality in your mind will you find in what's left that there's nothing to fear. There are no dangers. There's just reality meeting with reality, truth meeting with truth.

So the clearer and more honest you are about what you're doing right here, right now, the closer you get to that position where there's nothing to threaten you, where there are no dangers in life, no suffering. That's where this simple exercise of watching your breath, adjusting your breath, and watching it again can take you, if you really follow it all the way through.

Sticking with an Intention

November 14, 2005

It can be very chastening to see how changeable your mind is. You make up your mind to do something and then find yourself just a few minutes later heading off in another direction. Sometimes it's because you saw that your original intention was not as wise as you thought it was, but often it has nothing to do with that at all. The original intention was perfectly fine, but you're off headed at right angles to that intention. And you wonder why.

One of the purposes of meditation is to see exactly what's happening, why you can suddenly veer off at right angles, exactly what the mind does to itself in order to drop a perfectly good intention and go someplace totally different. In this way the meditation is like an experiment. You set up some conditions and then watch how they play out. In other words, you start by focusing on something you know is good: the breath. After all, the breath is the force of life and it's very immediate. It's not far off or dubious. It's right here, right now. You can see that sticking with the breath and allowing it to be comfortable is bound to have a good effect on the body and the mind. So there's no doubt there.

After setting up the breath as the object of your intention, the next step is to be aware of any other vagrant intentions that will pull you off in other directions. For the time being, the rule in your mind is: If a thought doesn't have anything to do with the breath, you don't want to get involved. So as soon as you find yourself veering off, you don't have to ask a lot of questions. If you're getting pulled away from the breath, just drop that thought-formation and come back to the breath, no matter how interesting, intriguing, or important that thought may be. Just let it go. Leave it in mid-sentence. You don't have to tie up any loose ends. You don't have to make a little note to come back there and check it out later. Just totally drop it and come back.

Now, the after-echo of that thought-formation may continue for a while. That's okay; you don't have to listen to it. Your job right now is to train the mind to be more and more consistent in sticking with an intention. And—sure enough—a second thought will come up, or a third, or a fourth, a tenth, or a hundredth, but no matter how many, you're not going to follow them. That's the promise you make yourself when you sit down. And the important thing is not to get discouraged when you find yourself breaking that promise. Just pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get back to the breath. Remember: This is a deeply ingrained habit we're fighting here, so it's going to take effort and time. If

you think training a dog is difficult, the human mind is even more devious, even more resistant to new tricks. It's difficult to train the human mind in this way, but it can be done.

And the time spent in training yourself in new habits like this is time well spent. After all, the force of intention is what shapes your life. We don't often think of the teachings on karma as having much relevance to the meditation. Sometimes we're even taught that karma was one of those weird pieces of cultural baggage that somehow got smuggled into Buddhism from its cultural background. But that's not the case at all. The Buddha had some very specific teachings on karma that had nothing to do with what anybody else was teaching at the time, and they're immediately relevant to why and how we're meditating.

The "why" has to do with the point I just raised. Given that karma is intention, and intention is the huge shaping force in your life, you want some control over it. If you make up your mind to do something that you know is good, you want to be able to stick with that intention. And where does intention happen? Right in the present moment. Where does it get changed? In the present moment. This is why we focus on the present moment, so that we can see the process of intention in action as it happens and can have a say in where that intention is going to go. The more solidly you can stay in the present moment—the more steadily you can maintain your balance here—the more you'll be able to see, and the more conscious say you'll have in the direction those intentions are going to take you. That's the "why."

As for the "how," you'll notice as things come up in the meditation that the vagrant intentions have very little to do with anything you were consciously thinking about as you sat down to meditate, when you made your intention to stay with the breath. And yet suddenly they appear. This relates to the Buddha's teachings on how your present experience is made up of three things: the results of past intentions, the actual process of intention in the present moment, and immediate results of that present intention. Certain thoughts are going to come up as a result of past intentions, and they don't necessarily have much meaning. They just happen to pop up and they can be pretty random.

Sometimes we look for inspiration or signs of some special knowledge as we meditate. That can happen, but it's also mixed up with a lot of really random stuff. It's like looking for meaning in your dreams: Some dreams are portentous, some are pretentious, and most are totally random. You can't take them as a dependable guide. In the same way, you can't necessarily take what pops into your mind in the present moment as a guide either, no matter how still or luminous your mind may be, for a lot of what pops up is simply the result of random past intentions. But what you can do—by staying solidly in the present moment and solidly with your intention to stay with the breath—is, over time, to

put yourself in a better position to evaluate what comes into the mind. If a thought of greed, anger, or delusion comes in, you'll be able to sense it and to see what it does because you're more sensitive to what's going on here.

Insights may come up, but you don't have to memorize them. Ajaan Fuang once said that if an insight is really valuable you don't have to take note of it for future reference. Instead, see if you can apply it to what's actually happening to your mind in the present moment. If it gives good results, stick with it. If it doesn't, drop it. If it's a really valuable insight, it'll stay with you because you got good results from it. You won't have to tag it, put it on a leash, and lead it back home with you.

The insights are not nearly as important as the ability to put the mind in a position where it can produce insights and evaluate them in terms of what they do in the present. That's why we're trying to get the mind in concentration. Try to be very, very alert to cause and effect here in the present moment. When you can see the connection between cause and effect, *that's* when you're in a position to evaluate your thoughts, because the worth of a thought lies in its effect. It's like having a goose that lays golden eggs: You focus on taking good care of the goose, rather than the eggs, because these golden eggs are like the gold in fairy tales. If you don't use them or give them away right away, they turn into feathers, they turn into charcoal. Remember fairy tales? The more you try to hold onto things, the more they turn into straw. If you get something good, you put it to use. You give it away. That's when you gain something more valuable in return.

It's the same with insights. If the insight is appropriate for the time and place, fine, use it. If not, just put it aside. It probably wasn't an insight anyhow, because, as I said, all kinds of things from your past karma can come popping up into a still mind. But the value of a still mind doesn't lie so much in what pops up as in your ability to evaluate what pops up. You can see cause and effect in action. When the mind is really still and very refined, it can sense the presence of greed, anger, and delusion even in minute quantities. It can sense what they do. Your powers of sensitivity are raised; your ability to see cause and effect is sharpened. You can tell genuine gold from fools' gold a lot better when the mind is still.

So you don't have to trust whatever comes up in the still mind. In fact, you're not *supposed* to trust anything. You're supposed to put everything to the test. The value of a still mind is not that it sees things but that it sees things in action. You can gauge your intentions a lot better when the basic underlying intention in the mind is reliable, solid, and sure. Here the basic underlying intention is this: Always to do what's most skillful. Always choose what's going to be the least harmful, the most beneficial course of action. And one of the most beneficial

things you can do for yourself is to learn how to stick with a very simple, good intention like this, like staying with the breath.

As you get more and more reliable in staying here, you provide the foundation for all the other insights and all the other good things that come from training the mind. So make sure the foundation is strong, make sure the foundation is solid, and the good things you develop to build on top of that are less likely to topple over.

The Karma that Ends Karma

October 12, 2005

This practice we're doing here is called the karma that puts an end to karma. And because karma is intention, this means that the practice is the intention to put an end to intention. That's why it's tricky. If you intend to put a stop to intention, that's an intention right there, but that doesn't mean it's impossible. It simply means there are going to be some unexpected twists and turns along the path.

As the Buddha said, the central part of his path is Right Concentration. Concentration basically means a firm intention, sticking with one object. You focus your intention on staying with the breath, staying with goodwill, whatever the object of your meditation, and then you try to maintain that intention. Then you see what you can learn about intention in the course of trying to maintain it, what other things you can learn about the mind as you try to maintain that intention.

The usual culprits to begin with are distractions, either internal or external. The internal ones are other thoughts, other intentions. At first you hardly realize that they're intentions. You're focusing on the breath, everything seems fine and then suddenly you're someplace else, half a world away. It's as if someone snuck up behind you, threw a sack over your head, dragged you off, and then dumped you on another continent. You don't know what happened in the meantime. You don't catch sight of the fact that an intention triggered the slipping away. There was one brief moment when you decided, "I'm out of here." Something else popped up in the mind and you went for it. There was a choice.

This is why meditation requires so much mindfulness and alertness. As we practice, mindfulness means the ability to keep your original intention in mind. Alertness means the ability to keep watch over things around that intention. On the one hand, you focus on what's going on with the object of your concentration. On the other, you keep track of how the mind is relating to it. Learn how to catch any warning signals that the mind is about to go. It may take a while for you to catch them because they're subtle and quick. The only way to see them is to stick with your original intention and keep yourself warned: "Okay, the mind is going to leave, so keep watch for how it does it."

At the same time, work on ways to make the original intention a good one to stay with. Otherwise the mind is going to resist. Staying with the breath, if it's not comfortable, is going to be like trying to keep a balloon under water. It'll stay

there only as long as your grip is really secure. As soon as there's the slightest slip, there it goes, popping up out of the water.

This is where you have to get your defilements on your side. They want comfort, so give them comfort. Try to make the breath as comfortable as possible. The breath here is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, it's your whole sense of energy flow in the body. As the image for the first jhana says, it's like working moisture through a ball of bath powder. Or you can think of making bread. You put water in with the flour and then knead it through the flour until every part of that ball of flour is moistened. You take whatever ease and sense of refreshment that comes from the breath and try to knead it through the body, all the way out to the tips of the toes, all the way out to the tips of the fingers, all over the front and back of the body. That makes the body a good place to stay.

Or you can think of systematically going through the body. Relax the fingers, relax the palms of your hands, the backs of your hands, your wrists, your arms, anywhere you can detect tension that pulls you out of a nice, comfortable straight-up-and-down posture. Start with the tips of your fingers and go up your palms, the backs of your hands, up your arms to the shoulders. Then start with your toes, go up your feet, your legs, pelvis, up the back, to the neck, and then all the muscles around the head. Then try to develop an all-around awareness that can keep the whole body relaxed all the time. This makes the body a much nicer place to stay.

As you work on this, it engages several parts of the mind, such as the desire for pleasure and the desire to explore as you begin to see connections throughout the body. This means you've got allies inside. As Ajaan Lee said, it's like taking Mara and putting him on your side.

So that's one strategy for staying with your original intention.

Another strategy is to learn to be very quick in dealing with your distractions. It's so easy to get entangled in the story line wherever your thoughts lead you. If the distractions come from within, a little thought bubble comes up in the mind and says, "Let's explore this and see where it goes." And you end up finding yourself in the Andromeda galaxy. In other words, these things can take you far, far away, into whole other worlds, whole other stories. Sometimes it's hard to pull yourself out of those stories because you want to see how they end. It's almost as if you're committed to it. This happens all the time. You walk past a TV and suddenly find yourself in some stupid story. You know the stories on TV are stupid, but you still get sucked in. That's because you're already a sucker for getting sucked in to these stupid stories in your mind.

So you have to learn to develop a certain amount of skepticism for these stories. Do you really need to know the end? Learn how to cut things off in the middle of a story. The characters won't mind.

In other cases, the story lines don't start out with internal distractions. They start out with external irritants that pull you away. Other people say or do things that irritate you, and all of a sudden you're focused on how much you don't like what they said or did. Then you get upset because they've destroyed your concentration. You can build up huge narratives about how they shouldn't have done that, shouldn't have destroyed your concentration. Actually, they weren't the ones who destroyed your concentration. *You* dropped it, ran after them, and then found some satisfaction in blaming them. Again, you've got to learn how to pull yourself out of that mindset as well. No matter what anybody else says or does, the breath is still there. You made the choice to leave. That's what you've got to watch out for.

So the whole purpose of concentration practice is to get to know the process of intention. The best way of doing that is to stick with this one intention as much as you can, because it gives you something to measure your other intentions against, so you can notice how they move.

Then, after the distractions get less and less compelling, you can begin to look into this intention you're trying to maintain. What is it made out of? Mostly verbal fabrication and mental fabrication. The verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation, two of the factors of jhana. Directed thought is when you focus your intention on an object; evaluation is when you examine the object, seeing whether you like it, don't like it, what comments you have to make on it. These two processes lie at the basis of every sentence in the mind, every sentence you speak. That's why they're called verbal fabrication.

Then there's mental fabrication: feeling and perception. These things have their intentional element, too. Even when you drop directed thought and evaluation to go from the first jhana to the second, there's still feeling and perception. In fact the perception—the perception of breath—is what keeps you there all the way up through the fourth jhana. Try to hold onto that perception until the breath energy in the body grows still. Then you stay with still breath as your perception. After a while the border between your body and what's outside your body begins to dissolve. You begin to realize that the border was a perception reinforced by the movement of the breath. When the breath gets still, there's nothing to reinforce it. So you can adjust your perception to space or consciousness, and there's no border to these things.

In other words, after dealing with distractions, you're able to focus on the one intention that forms your concentration and you begin to understand it. What's the process of fabrication going on in here? If it weren't consistent enough, you wouldn't understand it, for you'd get nothing but fleeting glimpses. A lot of your insights are just that—little fleeting glimpses—and then you try to connect them. It's like playing connect-the-dots. And the problem with connect-the-dots is that

the dots can be anything, like the constellations in the sky. We look up at Orion in the winter and we see his belt and his knife hanging from his belt. People in Thailand, though, look up at the same stars and see a plow. The belt is the actual plow and the knife is the part that pulls the plough. And who's to say that we're right and they're wrong?

The same holds true for our connect-the-dot insights. If awareness isn't continuous enough, all we see are the lines we've drawn. We don't see the actual dots. But when you can stick consistently with your original intention, you begin to see the actual dots and the actual lines: what actually connects to what, what causes what, and what actually makes up this intention we've been working so hard to maintain.

The other insight that comes is that, as you're maintaining an intention, it's like maintaining a yoga posture. Just as you relax into the yoga posture over time, in the same way you're relaxing into the concentration. You begin to realize that certain activities in your original intention are not necessary to keep it going. After the mind begins to settle down, you have less and less need for directed thought and evaluation. The breath gets more comfortable, you get more settled in, and there comes a point where you can drop the directed thought and evaluation. You can just be one with the breath—in the same way that when you're in a yoga posture you begin to realize that you've been tensing certain muscles that you don't have to tense. In fact, you'd be more comfortable in the posture if you relaxed those muscles. But those insights into which parts are going to have to be relaxed—you can't *will* those beforehand, but you can pose the question in your mind: What would be more comfortable here? That's how you can develop insight.

When the Buddha talks about developing insight, he focuses on posing certain questions in your mind: "How should fabrications be regarded? How should they be investigated?" You can't put the mind through a vipassana mill and guarantee that it is going to come out with insight. But if you learn to pose the right questions—and these are basically questions that come from the four noble truths—"Where is the stress? What are you doing that's causing the stress?": Insight starts with simple things like this. What's tense in the breath? What's tense in the body? Where is there any blockage in the body that's really unnecessary? When you see, you learn to relax it. Then you focus on the mental factors maintaining your state of concentration: Which ones are an unnecessary burden that makes it hard to maintain the concentration? Once you've settled in, you learn how to relax those mental activities.

That's the pattern for insight, and you follow that pattern all the way through as it takes you from one level of concentration to another. It takes concentration as far as it can go. Try to maintain your concentration as much as you can,

because the more consistently you can maintain it, the more you're likely to catch sight of those unnecessary actions. They're activities; they're inconstant. If they were totally constant, you'd never catch sight of their existence. It's because they come and go that you realize: Now it's here, now it's not. There's something going on here. The stress comes, the stress goes. The cause comes, the cause goes. And insight is a matter of learning how to catch sight of these things as they happen. You pare down the intention to stay still until there's nothing left to pare down without totally dropping intention.

Again, that's something unexpected. You can't intend to see it at a particular moment, but you can pose the question. The posing of the question is what's called appropriate attention. That's what opens things up, makes it possible to see things that you didn't intend to see, or to see them where you didn't intend to see them. This is how things finally open to the Deathless.

The Deathless is unintended. It's something that, when you hit it, you realize was always there, and that nothing you can do will change it. The reason you didn't notice it before was because you were entangled in your intentions and the results of your intentions. But you can't get there simply by saying, "Okay, I'm not going to intend anything anymore." That doesn't do it. You have to intend Right Concentration: That's the doing. That allows you to understand what it means to "do" well enough so that you can actually stop doing. That's the karma that puts an end to karma, the intention that allows you to understand intention until you finally get to the point where you can stop intending.

And it really is a stopping of intention. It's not a hall of mirrors where you say, "Okay, I'm going to stop intending to stop intending, -tending, -tending" which is an intention to stop the intention which is an intention and just goes on and on and on like that. You can't reason yourself into this, but it's something that can be induced. You can bring yourself to the brink where it can happen.

So work at this intention, the intention to stay focused on one preoccupation. Get to know it. Get to be on good terms with it. Get as much of the mind on your side as you can through making the breath comfortable, through making the process interesting. And then learn to be resolute at cutting away things that aren't really helpful, things that pull you off in other directions. This is going to require all your ingenuity, all your attention, but it's one of the few skills in life that's really worth all the effort it requires, that more than repays all the effort put into it. It'll see you all the way through every possible type of suffering, because its rewards are more than you can intend. You can think about the goal, you can have a picture of what it's like, but the picture in your preconceived notion has an intentional element. It's part of the path because it helps you along, gives you encouragement, but the actual rewards when they come are much greater.

So keep reminding yourself of the Buddha's instructions on tranquility and insight. For the tranquility, it's a question of how to settle in, how to really steady the mind in its intention, how to indulge in it, which means to learn how to enjoy it. The insight then comes in learning how to question the intention—not in the sense of doubting it, but in the sense of learning how to investigate what's going on here. When you learn how to bring the activities for tranquility and insight together in the right balance, then you really come to know what the Buddha was talking about.

Analyzing the Breath

April 18, 2005

When the Buddha teaches mindfulness immersed in the body, the first thing he discusses is being mindful of the breath. It's good to stop and think for a few moments about why he starts there. One of the reasons is that the breath is your most immediate experience of the body. We have a tendency to identify ourselves with the solid parts of the body and think of the breath as something secondary, something that comes in and out of the part we inhabit. But actually you wouldn't know about the solid parts of the body, the solid sensations in the body, if it weren't for the breath. For one thing, you'd be dead. And even if there were some way of being alive and not having the breath, the only way you'd know that there's something solid is because something is moving against it, moving over it. So think about this as you're focusing on the breath.

One way of approaching the body is thinking of it as primarily breath sensations. Ajaan Lee lists a whole series of them: the breath that moves up the body; the breath that moves down the body; the breath that goes out through all the blood vessels, tensing and relaxing the muscles in the blood vessels; the breath that goes out the nerves; the breath sensations that spin around in place; the breath energy constantly radiating from the diaphragm, the breath constantly coming up the spine. There are all kinds of breath sensations in the body. One way of making the body more comfortable is to think of it as *all* breath. Every sensation has a breath aspect to it, so focus on that breath aspect. If anything seems tight or tense, don't write it simply off as being a solid part of the body. Think of it as a breath sensation that somehow got tightened. Loosen it up. Approach it as you would a breath that should be moving through the body. See how that changes the way you relate to it.

This is one way of making the body interesting. An important principle in concentration practice is that if you try to rely solely on willpower to stay with an object, you won't have much staying power. But if you find the object absorbing, it's a lot easier to stay. So look at the body in a new light, from a new perspective, and see if it becomes more interesting to be sitting right here, not doing much of anything else, just staying with the body, exploring how it feels to be right here and not traveling around outside. If you try to lock the mind into the body, it's like locking a child into his room: He's going to try to figure out some way to get out the window, or start doing something in the room he knows his parents

don't like, just to spite them. The mind is like that: If you lock it in with an object, it'll start doing things to spite you.

So the trick is to leave the windows and doors open, but give the mind lots of things to play with, to get absorbed inside. That way the child will stay in its room without your having to force it, without your having to lock it in. The breezes come in the window and they won't blow you away, because you've got something interesting right here in the present moment. When the breath energy flows more smoothly through the body, aches and pains will calm down. You'll be healthier in general. As you really get to know the breath, you find that it can induce a sense of refreshment which, as you allow it to stay, gets more intense and shades into rapture—all simply from being with the breath.

So, if you find that the breath is boring, it's because, one, you're not paying attention; and two, you're not asking the right questions. You're assuming lots of things you don't really know about the body in the present moment. Learn how to question those assumptions. Is the body as solid as it seems? Certain sensations of tension or tightness: Do they have to be there? Maybe the way you're breathing is what's maintaining them. As you allow yourself to get absorbed in the breath, exploring these things, you require less and less willpower to stay here. This is the kind of concentration that has discernment as one of its integral factors. In terms of the bases of success, it's the fourth one: concentration based on the powers of analysis.

So give it a try. Explore what's actually happening as you just sit here. The breath comes in, the breath goes out, the breath spins around in place, gets blocked here, flows there, dissipates here, gets strong and constant there. Explore these things. It's part of learning how to take care of the body. And you find that in taking care of the body this way, you're taking care of the mind as well.

Immersed in the Body

September 19, 2004

Some people think that when the Buddha describes the five aggregates he's describing what we are, but that's precisely what he's not saying. He's saying that we're *not* that. But the mind does identify with these things—sometimes with the body, sometimes with feelings, perceptions, thought-formations, sometimes with sensory consciousness, sometimes different combinations, sometimes all of the above. If you could take a movie of the mind's sense of itself, it would be erratic and mercurial, like a reflection on water—slithering here and there, identifying with this, identifying with that, shape-shifting all the time. In changing position all the time like this, the mind expends a lot of energy. One of the things that we want to try to do as we meditate is to get it to stay in one place, to save some energy. As long as you're going to have a sense of self, keep it solid—rock solid—immersed in the body.

Breath meditation is one way of staying immersed in the body. The term in Pali is *kayagatasati*, mindfulness immersed in the body. And the quality of immersion is important. You want to fill the whole body, occupy the body, inhabit the whole body, as much as you can.

Where is your observer right now? For many of us, it's like a weird bird perched on our shoulders and peering through our eyes. It watches the body as if the body were something separate. But as we meditate, we're trying to get away from identifying with that particular observer; we want to be an observer filling the whole body. Your feet fill your feet, your hands fill your hands. Your entire sense of who you are fills the entire body.

This puts you in a position of strength, because if you're leaving big gaps of unoccupied territory in your body, other things will occupy it—different thoughts, different defilements. But if your awareness occupies your whole body, other things can't get in so easily. The image in the Canon is of a solid wooden door: a ball of string thrown at the door won't leave a dent at all. Even if things do come in and make a dent on the mind, you're going to know it, you're going to see it because you're right there. You're not off in some other corner of the body looking at something else.

So as you focus on the breath, try to get past the idea that you're in one part of the head watching the breath in other parts of the body. You want to occupy the whole body, bathed in the whole breath. The breath and the body should be surrounding your sense of where you are. And then you want to maintain that

sense of being centered in the body like this, filling the whole body with your awareness as you breathe in, as you breathe out.

Why? For one thing, this sense of filling the body helps you stay in the present moment. When the mind goes off thinking thoughts about past and future, it has to shrink its sense of awareness, shrink its sense of itself, down to a small enough dot so that it can slip into the past or slip into the future. In other words, you latch onto the part of the body that you use as a basis for thinking about the past or the future, while other parts of the body get blotted out. But if you're filling the body with your awareness and can maintain that full awareness, you can't slip off into the past and future unless you want to. So this is one way of nailing yourself down to the present moment. Your inner hands are nailed to your physical hands, your feet to your feet. You can't move.

Think of the breath coming into the *whole* body. Every cell of the body is participating in the breathing process, and you're sitting here in the midst of it. This gives your sense of observing self a greater solidity, so that when thoughts come into the mind you're not knocked off balance by them. You've got a solid foundation. The word they use for the object of meditation in Pali, *arammana*, literally means "support," the idea being that your mind is standing firm on something. You're standing here in the body. This is your location. This is where you take your stance. And when your stance is solid, nobody can kick you over or knock you down.

It's like riding on the subway in New York City. The subway sways back and forth and up and down and all around. If your stance is planted just right—so that you don't get knocked over either by the acceleration or deceleration of the train or the swaying to the left or the right—you can maintain your balance no matter what. But life is a lot more erratic even than a subway train. The things that happen around you—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, things that people do, things that people say: They can hit the mind with a lot more violence, with a lot more force than the wobbling or sudden braking of a subway train. So the mind needs a really solid stance.

This is why we work on providing this support for the mind not only while we're sitting here meditating but also throughout the day. Some people complain that it's asking too much of them to pay attention to the events of the day and to the breath at the same time. Well, if you're sitting in the back of your head watching the breath in the body and watching things outside, it does add an extra burden: You've got two things to watch at any one time instead of just one. But if you think of yourself as immersed in your body, inhabiting your whole body, this puts you in a different position. You're standing in the breath, in a position of solidity, a position of strength. From that position you watch things outside, so that instead of having extra things to do, you've simply got a better

place to maintain your stance. If your sense of self is inhabiting one little part of the body, and things come in from the outside with great force—somebody does something or says something that hits you the wrong way—you can get knocked off kilter really easily because your stance isn't solid. The mind is so used to flitting around from one position to another that it's very easily knocked off balance. But if you're standing, filling your whole body with your awareness—this is your stance, this is your support—then no matter what comes, you can keep your balance.

So try to maintain this sense of inhabiting your body, being bathed in the breath, being surrounded by the breath on all sides, not only while you're sitting here but also as you go through the day. Try to maintain this quality of being fully immersed in the body, fully aware, fully mindful, fully alert. Once you can maintain this stance in different situations, then you can start observing the sense of self you've created here. If your sense of self is flitting all around—first with a feeling, then with a perception, then back to a feeling again, then to perception and feeling, like those weird amoeba-like shapes that flit across the surface of water—it's hard to observe, to get a sense of, "What *is* this self? Why does the mind need a sense of self?" But as you maintain this one sense of self inhabiting the body, immersed in the body, surrounded on all sides by the breath, it's there long enough for you to observe it: What's it made of? What's the form here? Where's the feeling? Where's the perception? Where are the thought-formations? Where's the consciousness? It's all right here, relatively still, enough that you can really observe it.

There are lots of advantages to having a sense of mindfulness immersed in the body, your sense of self immersed in the body. Eventually you take that sense of self apart, but in the meantime you learn how to use it so that you don't get knocked over by all the winds and currents of the world. You don't get knocked over by all the currents flowing out of the mind either. When they talk about taking the body in-and-of-itself as your island, as your refuge, this is what they mean: The current of the river flows past, but the island stays solid because it's deeply rooted. It's made of rock, like Manhattan; it's not a sand-bar. You've got your awareness deeply rooted in your hands, in your feet, in the different parts of your body, not just in your head, not flitting around from here to there. You've got a large sense of awareness filling the present.

This puts you in a position of strength, which you want to maintain for as long as you can. It helps ward off the currents that come flowing from outside or inside, and it also allows you to see your sense of self a lot more clearly, to understand what it is—where there's still suffering even in this position of strength, where there's still stress and uncertainty and inconstancy. But first you do your best to make it constant. How are you going to believe the Buddha's

teachings on inconstancy until you've found some constancy in your awareness? You push the limits. It's only when you really push the limits that you can gain a true sense of where things start pushing back. When the Buddha gave his teachings, he didn't simply ask for people to believe what he said. He said to push back inside yourself to test them.

So. Inconstancy, stress, not-self: How do you test those? By creating a constant sense of ease in the body, because this awareness has to be relaxed in order to last. And you can identify with it, inhabit it fully. It's only in this way that you can push against the limits and see where the principles of inconstancy, stress, and not-self will push back even in this state of mind.

But work on it first. Remember, this is a skill: taking this stance, maintaining this stance, being concentrated in the body, but concentrated with an expansive sense of ease so that it doesn't become oppressive. Work at filling the body with your awareness so that if they were going to take a picture of your sense of self, of the mind's sense of self, it would be like the image in the Canon: a person totally surrounded by a white cloth from head to toe. Or like Ajaan Lee's image of the mantle of a Coleman lantern—all its threads bathed in a bright, white, unmoving flame. Try to saturate your body with this sense of relaxed but steady awareness, and see what happens as a result.

Marshalling the Emotions

October 7, 2005

Meditation has to engage not only the thinking part of your mind, but also the emotional part. Otherwise it gets dry and doesn't totally train you. So it's good to think about the emotions that need to be involved in meditation for the training to be more complete.

The first emotion you're supposed to bring to the training is *samvega*. That's the emotion Prince Siddhartha felt on seeing the old person, the sick person, and the dead person. *Samvega* is a word that doesn't quite have an equivalent in English. It means a sense of shock, dismay, or urgency, and it's related to the adjective '*samvigga*,' or terrified. It's a chastened realization of what life is like: that the pleasures you've been pursuing are fleeting and never really provide satisfaction. Look at you yourself: *You're* fleeting as well. And the amount of suffering in life: Not only is life fleeting, but there's a lot of suffering before you fleet totally away.

There's that famous passage where the Buddha says that the waters of the ocean are less than the tears you've shed in all your many lifetimes. You've drunk more milk from your mother's breast, whether your mother was human or a dog or whatever, than there is water in the ocean. As the Buddha concludes, just thinking about these things should be enough to give you a sense of terror, dismay, and dispassion, enough to make you want to gain release.

Taken on its own, *samvega* can be a very depressing realization, which is why it has to be paired with *pasada*, or confidence: confidence that there is a way out. In the famous story about young Prince Siddhartha seeing the old person, the sick person, and the dead person, he also saw a forest mendicant. That was his fourth vision. His realization after seeing the forest mendicant was, "This must be the way out. If there's any way out, this is it." And so he pursued that conviction with a strong sense of clarity and confidence.

Ajaan Suwat, when led the meditation here at Metta, would often say, "Start with a sense of *pasada*, that this is your way out. Stick with the practice with that sense of conviction, confidence, desire. If you approach the meditation in a desultory way, you're going to get desultory results. You really have to be devoted to what you're doing here." Or as Ajaan Fuang would say, "You have to be crazy about the meditation if you want to meditate well." You have to get fully into the meditation so that it really engages your imagination. What can be done with the mind as you focus it on the breath? What can be done with the

breath? How can you learn to relate to the breath in a way that allows you to settle down and see what's going on in the mind? Be curious. Find out.

When you meet up with obstacles, you need the sort of inquisitive mind that doesn't give up, that tries to find a way around the obstacles, with the conviction that there *is* a way around. That's what the confidence is for. If you're lost in the woods convinced that there's no way out, there's *going* to be no way out. If you think there's a way out, at least you have a chance of finding it.

So, when you come up against issues in the meditation, be confident in using your ingenuity as much as you can. If you find yourself controlling the breath, it's natural that you're going to be controlling the breath. In fact, it's important to realize that that's happening. Many times they say, "Let the breath come in and out on its own. Don't control it." What happens then, though, is that you don't notice how you're controlling it. The controlling all goes underground. What we're doing here is bringing the issue of control out into the open. As long as you're controlling the breath anyway, try to do it consciously, skillfully.

And what is it that controls the breath? There's an intention and there's a perception. Can you be clear about your intentions and perceptions? Can you change your intention to be more sensitive to what the breath really needs? Can you change your perception of the breath so that the way you control it actually causes less stress, does less harm? What ways of thinking of the breath coming in and out of the body help to overcome the unhealthy or unskillful ways that you control the breath? What different kinds of breathing energy are there in the body? Look into that as well.

You'll find that different kinds of breath energy are helpful at different times. When you've got lower back problems, it's good to think of the breath energy coming up continually from the soles of your feet, giving more strength to the back as it goes up and then out the top of the head. If there's a tightness in the chest, think of the tightness dissipating out through the shoulders, the arms, and the fingers. In other words, use your ingenuity, so that you become more and more interested in staying in the present moment.

All too often we approach concentration practice as an exercise in forcing the mind to stay still: not to think, not to move, not to do anything. And of course as soon as you tell it not to move, it's going to start fidgeting around like a little kid told to sit still in a chair. But if you give the kid something to play with, something to explore, he can get still and very enthralled. He can sit in the chair for hours without complaining.

So try to engage your ingenuity as you practice. And always have the confident conviction that no matter what the problem in your meditation, there's a way around it. That confidence is going to help see you through. Of course, simply the confidence is not going to be enough. You have to use your ingenuity

until you start seeing results as well. And when you start seeing results there will be a sense of ease, and finally a sense of rapture—a sense of fullness or refreshment.

When you've finally figured out how to be with the breath consciously and intentionally, and yet can allow the breath energy to feel full in every little cell in the body, rapture arises. You can maintain that rapture by learning how to maintain the right amount of pressure so that you're not squeezing the breath, pushing it or pulling it—and some people experience this as a sensation of drowning. They're so used to breathing in a particular way, or having the mind's cartoon idea of what the breathing has to do as it comes in and out the body, that when they finally give up on that cartoon idea there's a sense of drowning. Some people find this really scary, but it's nothing to be scared of at all. Simply sit with it. If the breath is going to come in, it's going to come in. If it's not going to come in, don't worry about it. You're not going to die. The breath will have to come in at some point if it really has to. And maybe it won't have to. Maybe you're getting enough oxygen through your pores.

So allow the breath not to disturb anything that feels still. If you don't disturb the stillness, it grows a sense of fullness, and with it a sense of ease. You become a connoisseur of your breathing. You learn to really enjoy it. This amount of enjoyment is a necessary part of the path as well. It's the food of your meditation. As you learn to feed off that, you start looking at the other things the mind has been feeding on and realize that they're pretty miserable food. This is where the sense of *nibbida* comes in. It's sometimes translated as disenchantment, sometimes even as disgust or revulsion. What it means is a sense of having had enough of something and no longer being attracted to it, because you've got better food to feed on. Once you're used to good, wholesome food, you feel repelled by junk food. You don't crave it any more.

A lot of the preliminary work in discernment consists of learning how to maintain a sense of stillness, of being centered with a sense of fullness, and learning to adjust it as you need it: learning to gladden the mind when it needs to be gladdened, to release the mind when it needs to be released, to steady it when it needs to be steadied. And every time you catch it slipping off to feed on something else, ask yourself, "Why are you going there? What good do you get out of that kind of feeding?"

A lot of the discernment comes in seeing that the other things you've been feeding on all through your life really are not worth the effort. You've really got something much better here. Only when you've been able to use the concentration as a basis for overcoming passion, especially sensual passion, do you have to transcend the concentration itself. That's when your sense of *nibbida*, or disenchantment, can turn to the concentration, because you've discovered

something in the mind that doesn't need to feed on anything anymore, even on the pleasure and the rapture, the equanimity of concentration. That's when *nibbida* and *viraga*, or dispassion, become total. That's when they can liberate the mind.

As you can see, the meditation involves a long series of different emotions. The Buddha sometimes talks about the grief and the joy of being on the path. Those get involved as well. The grief is simply the realization that there are a lot of dangers in life and you haven't reached the goal yet. But you learn how to use even the grief as a spur to your practice. At the same time, it should be combined with a sense of confidence, conviction, desire, leading to the joy that comes when you can actually see yourself making progress. The mind can settle down more than it used to, has a greater sense of wellbeing, wholeness, and fullness than it had before. You can take joy in that.

So even though the path involves figuring things out intellectually, that's not all it is. It's also a matter of learning how to marshal these different emotions, some of which are normally regarded as negative: *samvega*, grief, disenchantment, disgust. But they have their uses, so learn how to cultivate them all along the way. Without these emotions, the practice doesn't go anywhere. With them, it can take you to release.

Good Humor

May 11, 2005

Ajaan Suwat would often begin his evening Dhamma talks by saying to put yourself in a good mood, to approach the meditation with a sense of confidence, reminding yourself that you're doing something that's very good. It may be difficult, but it's good. And it requires that you keep yourself in a good mood, no matter what happens, no matter how poorly it goes. Grace under pressure is an important skill in the meditation: the ability to smile to yourself no matter what happens—what the Thais call smiling in defiance of the tigers. That ability has saved a lot of meditators from going off course, getting discouraged, and letting their meditation crash.

So whatever comes up in the meditation, treat it with good humor. The ability to laugh at yourself is probably one of the most important abilities you have as a meditator. It's a matter of perspective, and also of balance. After all, you have to keep a certain amount of pressure on yourself as you meditate. This is an earnest endeavor we're involved in, but you can't let it get grim. Find out for yourself what exactly is the right amount of pressure to put on yourself and how to apply the pressure skillfully.

You've probably heard the story about the monk who was so delicately brought up that he even had hair on the soles of his feet. When he spent hours doing walking meditation, of course his feet started wearing through, getting all bloody, and this got him discouraged. "Well," he said to himself, "maybe I'd better return to the lay life." That was back in the days when the Buddha was still alive, so the Buddha levitated there—don't you wish you had the Buddha levitating to you when your meditation got bad? The Buddha came and said to the monk, "When you were a lay person, you used to play the lute, right?" The monk said, "Yes." "Well, what happened when the strings were too tight?" "They would snap." "And when they were too loose?" "You couldn't get a good sound out of them."

The Buddha then said "It's the same with the meditation. First tune your level of energy, the amount of effort you can put into the meditation. And then tune everything else, all the other faculties—conviction, mindfulness, concentration, discernment—to the level of energy you can manage." It's like tuning a guitar. First you tune one string and then you tune the other strings to the first one. In meditating, your first string is the amount of energy at your disposal. You want to put enough pressure on yourself to actually get results, but not so much that

you snap. And one good way of putting a lot of pressure on yourself without snapping is to keep a good sense of humor about the whole thing, to keep yourself in a good mood.

This involves the way you talk to yourself as the meditation goes on. When things don't go well, just drop whatever it is that's not going well. Move back to a level where you're pretty sure you can do things properly. And don't engage in a lot of recriminations, because they don't help anything at all. Just remind yourself that that's not what we're here for, drop it, and go on. When you develop this sense of good mood, you can ratchet up the level of pressure—the amount of time you spend with the meditation, the persistence with which you pursue it—without snapping.

So whatever comes up in the meditation, whether it's good or bad or whatever, always try to keep a good sense of humor. Even when things seem to be going well, maintain a good sense of humor. Don't get swollen up with your importance or your accomplishment, because then you get complacent and it's easy to crash.

When I went to study with Ajaan Fuang, one of the first things that really drew me to him was his sense of humor. A good sense of humor usually goes with wisdom. The ability to step back and keep things in perspective: That's what makes you wise. It's precisely what you need as a meditator. So when things start getting grim, when nothing seems to work, just step back for a bit and try to regain your good humor. You'll find that that, more than anything else, will carry you through.

Suppressed Emotions

December 11, 2004

Researchers have done studies showing that people who regularly suppress their emotions tend to be stupider than people who don't. They're less observant and have trouble thinking through things clearly. And so the question is, when you're meditating are you making yourself stupid? It depends on how you meditate.

But first you have to understand what it means to suppress an emotion: You deny that it's there. In other words, suppressing it doesn't just mean that you're simply not expressing it; it means that you're also trying to hide it from yourself. The walls of denial go up in the mind. They make it difficult to think clearly, to connect things, to see relationships. And it takes a lot of energy to keep those walls up, which means you have less energy to observe things. This is why suppressing emotions makes you stupid.

So as you meditate, it's important to understand that you're not here to suppress an emotion, to deny that it exists. You want to be very clear about what's going on in the mind, but at the same time you want to learn how to use the mind wisely, to approach your emotions wisely. When fear, greed, anger, or delusion come up in the mind, it's not necessarily helpful to express them outside because sometimes that makes it difficult to observe what's going on, too. There has to be a middle way between the expression and the suppression. This is important. Often as you meditate you try to tell yourself, "Don't react. Just be equanimous. Don't get excited. Don't get worked up about things." And then you try to convince yourself that that's what's actually happening. You see ideals of what an enlightened person is like—very calm, peaceful, equanimous—and you try to clone the calm, to clone the equanimity. Remember, though, that Right Cloning is not one of the factors of the Path.

The relevant factor is Right Mindfulness, having the right frame of reference for dealing with pain and pleasure as they come. If you view the pleasure simply as something to run toward, or the pain as something to fear or run away from, you're creating a situation in which the emotions that arise—the liking and the disliking—are going to get in the way of really seeing anything. So you want to create a different frame. Instead of seeing yourself as a person partaking of the pain or the pleasure, you want to dismantle that perception. You want to have another way of approaching pain and pleasure so that you don't feel threatened by the pain and don't simply indulge in the pleasure.

This is why you need a technique as the foundation of your meditation. We've talked many times about meditation as not just a technique, but you can't meditate without a technique, either. You need to view the technique in the context of certain values, certain understandings, but you can't denigrate technique—because it provides part of your frame of reference.

For example, you're dealing here with the breath, and you may notice that some ways of breathing are more comfortable than others. Then you begin to realize the connection between the discomfort and the breath, the comfort and the breath. And because the breath is something you can control to a certain extent, you've got your handle. You can try breathing in different ways. You can change the rhythm. You can change the texture, the depth. You can try heavy breathing, light breathing, broad or narrow, shallow or deep. That's changing the mechanics of the breathing.

You can also change your perception of the breath. When you breathe in, exactly what's happening? What's moving? And what's moving what? Often we have cartoon ideas about the process, and those ideas determine which muscles we're going to expand, which ones we're going to contract, which sensations we believe have to be part of the in-breath, which sensations have to be part of the out-breath. But if you can learn to question those presuppositions, you find that the breathing opens up. There are lots more possibilities. You can conceive of the body as a sponge: When you breathe, there's energy coming in and out through every pore. If you apply that perception to the breathing, the actual physical sensation of the breathing is going to change as well. The rhythm is going to change. Or you can think of having an energy core that runs down the center of the body. The in-breath comes in to that central core; when it goes out, it leaves that central core. Or you can think of breathing in and out through parts of the body that normally aren't associated with the breath. You can breathe in and out through your legs for example, or through your brain or your hands.

As you experiment with notions of the breathing, you discover lots of varieties. And they have different results in terms of feelings of ease or discomfort, pleasure or pain. You find that patterns of tension in the body that you assumed were a necessary part of having the body sit upright, or having the body breathe, are actually not necessary at all. You can breathe through them and they begin to loosen up. This leads you to explore other feelings of blockage or pain in the body as well.

Say there's a pain in your knee. How much of that pain is actually the result of physical causes and how much of it is a result of the way you're breathing? You can experiment, and in this way the technique gives you a different framework for looking at sensations of pleasure, sensations of pain. In other words, where there's pleasure you realize that to maintain that pleasure you

can't just wallow in it or create a sense of yourself as gulping it down, because that usually puts an end to it. But if you stay with the breath and maintain your perception of the breathing in the right way, you can maintain that sense of pleasure, too. It's a positive thing. After all, the pleasure that comes from concentration is one of the factors of the path, Right Concentration. It's something to be developed.

As for the pain, that also becomes something you can approach with the tools you've learned from your technique. Try breathing through the tension around the pain. If the pain is in your knee, you can think of the breath coming in and out right at the knee. Or you can think of it going down the leg and through the pain in the knee and then out through the toes. Or if it's already coming into the knee, you can think of it coming in from the kneecap or coming in from behind the knee. There are all kinds of ways you can play with your perceptions of the breath.

As you experiment with them, you find that they have an important impact on the actual feeling of pain and your attitude toward the pain. You feel less threatened by it. You begin to develop an inquisitive attitude, which as the Buddha said is how you approach the First Noble Truth. You want to comprehend it, and that requires you to be inquisitive about pain, trying to understand it.

So the breathing technique gives you several important approaches for dealing with the pain. Instead of just sitting here and spinning out over the pain—thinking, "Here I am sitting and hurting myself by letting my knee get all bent up like this"—you can focus instead on, "Okay, what are the mechanics of the pain? How do they relate to the energy flow in the body?" Having a comfortable breath sensation as your basis in some other part of the body gives you a place you can go when the pain gets too much to handle. You've got a place you can turn around and run to, and when you have that sense of safety and security then you feel less threatened by the pain. You're more inquisitive, and at the same time you actually have tools that can lessen the pain.

And because your approach is one of being inquisitive rather than trying to push the pain away or squeeze it away, your attitude is going to have a huge effect on how you experience the pain. There are cases where the change in attitude will make the pain go away. At other times the pain won't go away but it doesn't matter because you're not involved in trying to feed off the pain. You don't find yourself forced to consume the pain. You're not a consumer anymore. You're an experimenter, inquiring into "What's the nature of this pain? How much does the way you breathe affect the pain? How much does your attitude affect the pain? What are you doing that makes the pain hurt the mind?" After all, the pain is something in the body. It doesn't have to hurt the mind. We're

doing unskillful things, we have unskillful attitudes, unskillful ways of relating to the pain that drag it into the mind. We've got to turn around and look: "Okay, what are we doing that turns the pain into suffering for the mind?"

So by creating this new frame of reference through the technique, you're not suppressing your fear of pain. Your new frame of reference changes your attitude toward the pain so that you can see it more clearly.

We often believe that our emotions are a given, that they're purely visceral, that they come prior to our thoughts, but that's not necessarily so. A lot of unspoken or poorly articulated attitudes have gotten buried in our minds—a lot of unskillful habits of dealing with pain, say, that come from way back when. Those are the things that fuel our emotions around pain. They also fuel our emotions around pleasure. As we create this new framework, though, we'll start stirring up some of those attitudes and calling them into question: "Who is this 'me' that's been devouring the pleasure and then suddenly finds itself devouring pain? Who is this consumer? And is it just consuming or is it also producing the pain, producing the pleasure?" Start questioning these attitudes to get a clearer sense of what's actually going on.

In this way you're not trying to clone enlightenment and you're not trying to suppress your emotions. You're just learning how to deal with your emotions in a more intelligent way. And that way the meditation, instead of making you dumber, actually makes you more perceptive, more intelligent, better able to see relationships. It's not a matter of suppression. It's not a matter of pretending that you're awakened when you're not. You're just learning to be very frank about what's actually going on by learning to question your assumptions of what seems to be obvious about what's going on.

So the meditation is not a process of programming you to have a certain sort of personality or certain sort of demeanor. It's not teaching you to clone anything. It's a series of instructions for how to explore. Instead of piling more denial on top of the denial already there in the mind, you're learning how to peel it away and not to be afraid of it, not to be afraid of what you're going to find as you peel it away, because you've got your tools to deal with whatever comes up.

Resistance

October 25, 2004

The chants we do in the evening, before the meditation, are meant to put you in the right frame of mind to do the meditation, pointing out skillful ways of thinking. Whether we're contemplating the body; issues of aging, illness, death, and karma; thoughts of goodwill; reflection on the nature of the world: All of these thoughts are designed to remind you of how important it is to meditate. They also remind you of your motivation for meditation. Whether you're here to find something solid in the midst of the world, or as an expression of goodwill, it's useful to remember—each time you sit down to meditate or do walking meditation—*why* you're doing it, the importance of what you're doing, so that you do it with an attitude of proper respect and attention. In other words, you don't just go through the motions. You don't treat it casually.

This is important work we're doing here—a point that's easy to forget. So we keep reminding ourselves, because thinking like this is an integral part of the meditation. People often believe that we're trying to learn how not to think, or trying to get the mind away from its conditioning simply by stopping any language from going through the mind. But the Buddha's instructions on meditation involve a lot of thinking, training the mind to think in skillful ways. But unlike psychotherapy—which tries to trace your thoughts back to their origins, where they're coming from in time—he focuses on where they're going, where they lead. Do they lead you where you want to go? And he gives some recommendations on ways of thinking that really help you go in the right direction.

As you carry through with his ways of thinking, part of your mind is going to rebel. For example, when you develop thoughts of goodwill there may be a little voice in the back of the mind saying, "Well, I don't really feel goodwill for these people." Or, "I don't give a damn about where my thoughts are leading, I want to think about *this*." Don't assume that the purpose of these exercises in directed thinking is to smother up those other thoughts, or to pretend they don't exist. Actually, the purpose of the exercises is to dig the problems up, bring them out into the open. If the question of how you think about the beings in the world isn't brought up, you can sail merrily along with all sorts of mixed motives, all sorts of mixed attitudes, not really being aware of what you're doing, or of how your attitudes are coming out in your actions.

Or if you have that apathetic feeling, “It doesn’t really matter what I do, so I might as well just do what I like” —it’s good to know that it’s there. Then you can deal with it.

So if you find these argumentative thoughts coming up in your mind, take note of the fact. Ask yourself: Are you ready to dig into them? Are you strong enough? If you aren’t, you can continue with the meditation, leaving them for the time being, but at least you know they’re there. This is important. As Ajaan Lee once said, to practice is to learn about your defilements, the things that hide under the surface and exert a lot of pressure and influence on your life, often without your knowing it. You’re a lot better off knowing they’re there, even if you can’t quite deal with them yet. You’re in a better position knowing they’re there and that they’ll have to be dealt with. Sometimes just bringing them to the surface is enough to make you realize that you don’t want to identify with them.

If apathy comes up, you look at it. Do you really want to side with it? Look at the lives of other people who are apathetic. Where do they go? Or if a voice in your mind has ill will for this or that group of people: Is that a voice that you really want to identify with? Remember, you have the choice.

We’re not here to hammer out our genuine opinions about things, to reach a final judgment on them. We’re here to see where thinking goes and how to use our thinking in skillful ways. This is part of the training. It’s like training for a marathon. Once you’ve made up your mind to run the marathon, you’ve got to deal with the thoughts in the mind that resist. Some of them you can simply push out of the way as being ludicrous or totally out of line with your real aspirations. Others you have to sit down with and work through. But the fact that you’ve made an aspiration is important. If you’ve decided that this is an aspiration you really want to hold to, you owe it to yourself to work through all of your resistance, because so many of us go through our lives aimlessly, without any kind of aspiration at all. Here, as we’re meditating, we’ve got a big one: putting an end to suffering.

As the Buddha points out, in the course of training the mind you’ve got to learn to deal with skillful and unskillful thoughts—“skillful” meaning those that lead in the direction of putting an end to suffering; unskillful ones, those leading in the other direction. At least you’ve made it clear to yourself where you want to go. That, in and of itself, is an important accomplishment. Even if you haven’t devoted yourself 100% in that direction, it’s important at least that the issue is raised.

So many of us go through life without even thinking about where we’re headed. We think about it a little bit here and there, but not in any concerted way, not in a way that makes us sit down and really look at our lives. For a lot of people, thinking about the general trajectory of their lives is pretty depressing, so

they push the issue away. Big issues like aging, illness, and death get pushed off to the corner until they can no longer be pushed off. Then they come out at you with their eyes red and their fangs gleaming. You're not prepared to deal with them. Often they hit precisely when you're at your weakest point, flat on your back. If you haven't prepared for them, they come at you while you're down.

Here while you're meditating, at least, the issues are raised. You've got to ask yourself while you're healthy, while you're young enough, while you're still alive: What are you going to do to prepare for the time when aging, illness, and death and separation move in? And you're actually given a course of practice, something to train in, to help you out when those things happen.

So, when you're given a practice—whether it's the precepts, or the contemplations that the Buddha recommends—it's not that you're going into denial, pretending that you don't want to break a precept, or pretending that you don't harbor feelings of ill will. These contemplations are meant more to raise the issue: Do you really believe that your actions are important? Do you really believe that it's important to act skillfully? Do you believe that your thoughts are important, that it's important to think skillfully? Take some time to probe into those questions, because they're central to your life. And don't let yourself get sucked in by the media out there. They'd rather that you not ask those questions, that you lead a very short-sighted life, so you'll be content just to buy their things.

So this is an act of resistance here. It's also an act of wisdom. When a particular reflection or contemplation brings up uncomfortable issues in the mind, realize that that's part of its purpose: to bring up those uncomfortable reactions, if they're there. If they're not there, you're fine. If they *are* there, you want to know. As I said, sometimes when they come up they just wither away in the light of your awareness. Other times you realize that they're like boulders that have been hidden under the water. The water has lowered a little bit, and now you see that there are boulders down there. You may not be in a position to dig them up, but at least you can avoid them for the time being, knowing that someday you're going to have to clear the channels.

In the meantime, you're alerted that you have to work on your tools—mindfulness, concentration, discernment—so that eventually you can dig out those boulders. Then they'll no longer be in the way.

Gladdening the Mind

September 2, 2004

Gladdening the mind. This is an important skill in the meditation. The Buddha lists it as one of the basic steps in mindfulness of breathing. If your meditation gets dry, it starts to seize up like an engine without any lubricant. So you need to keep your mind lubricated, keep it refreshed as you're practicing.

There are lots of different ways of doing this. Ajaan Lee gives the analogy of a parent who hears her child crying and knows when to take it out for some air, when to give it something to play with, when to feed it. In other words, you learn to read the cry and to look at what the child is doing, so that you can get an idea of what needs to be done to put the child back in a good mood. The mind is very much like a child—you have to look after its moods every now and then.

One way is to drop the breath for a while and focus on some of the other recollections that the Buddha recommends: recollection of the Buddha, recollection of the Dhamma, recollection of the Sangha.

With recollection of the Buddha, you remind yourself that you're following a path set out by someone who was totally free of defilement—who had no agendas, no ideas he was pushing just for the sake of satisfying or pleasing himself. He had found what worked and he taught it straightforwardly.

Now, where are you going to find something like that anywhere else in the world? One of the reasons why deconstructionism is so prevalent in universities is because people often advance an idea because they want power over other people, they want to influence other people to act in ways that are pleasing to them. The purpose of deconstructionism is to see through those agendas. But in the Buddha's case, all he asked was that people practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. On the night of his death, when the devas were singing songs, throwing down flowers and incense in honor of him, he said, "This is not the way to pay homage to the Buddha. The way to pay homage is to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma"—which means practicing for the sake of dispassion, practicing for the sake of disenchantment with things, practicing for release. In other words, you show homage to the Buddha by gaining release from suffering for yourself. That's all he asked for. His was the most compassionate of motives. So when you're getting discouraged about the path, think about the other paths you might be following in life and realize there's nothing quite like this one. Even when you haven't yet reached the end of the path, it's still a good path to be on.

And the same holds true for recollection of the Dhamma. Think of all the good things the Dhamma has you develop inside. Of course, being on the path means that they're not fully developed yet, but at least you're headed in the right direction; your trajectory is headed to the right place. The Buddha talks about the grief that comes from not having attained your goal on the path, but he said, Look, it's a lot better than the grief that comes from not having sights or sounds or smells or tastes or tactile sensations that you like—he calls that “householder grief.” And where does that grief lead? It leads people to struggling and fighting and grabbing after things that are just going to slip through their fingers. Whereas the grief that comes from being on the path doesn't cause strife and it leads in the right direction. Just that thought should inspire you to practice further on the path. The only problem is when the grief gets too heavy, the discouragement gets too heavy—that's when you need to gladden the mind, by reflecting on all the good things you've done as part of the path.

And the path is asking you to do only good things, things you can be proud of, things that feel noble, honourable. You're not being asked to compromise your ideals when you practice the Dhamma. In fact, you're being asked to raise your ideals to a higher standard.

Then there's recollection of the Sangha. When your mind feels full of defilement, remind yourself that members of the Noble Sangha have all been in the same place you are. And people of all kinds—men, women, children, rich people, poor people, educated, uneducated, healthy, sick—they've all been able to find within themselves the strengths needed to overcome the weaknesses within them. If you're having a long, dry stretch in your path, read some of the *Theri-* and *Theragathas*, where the monks and nuns tell of long dry stretches in their own practice: thirty years or more. And yet, eventually, they still gained Awakening. So you can take encouragement from that.

Then there's recollection of your generosity, of your virtue—all the good things you've done as you've been following the path. This is a valid recollection, a good one for gladdening the mind as well.

As for recollection of the devas: This doesn't mean you sit thinking about devas. You think about qualities that make a person into a deva. The first is the sense of shame you feel when you think of doing things that are beneath you, realizing that you're a better person than that. The second is fear of the consequences of unskilful actions—which means that you have a well-integrated sense of self, able to deny yourself immediate pleasure that's going to have long-term bad consequences for the sake of actions that may not be so pleasant right now but are going to lead to good results on into the future. These are qualities that make people devas, and you have them within yourself. So that helps to gladden the mind.

There's the story in the Canon of a monk sitting in the forest on a holiday night. Off in the distance he can hear people playing music and having a good time and he feels very discouraged. Here he is miserable, sitting out alone in the forest, and everybody else is having a good time. And a deva comes and says, "Look, there are lots of people who really envy you because they see where you're headed; as for the people out there having a good time, their lives aren't headed anywhere."

So when the path starts getting discouraging and the mind starts feeling dry, these are things you can think about to remind yourself that you're on a good path. It may be a long path, but it's a lot better than not being on a path at all, or on a path that requires compromises in terms of your ideals, in terms of your sense of what's right and honourable, and then yields a happiness that laughs in your face and runs away.

Another good way to gladden the mind is with the breath: finding ways to breathe that give a sense of ease, wellbeing, and refreshment both to the body and the mind here in the present moment. Don't be afraid of those feelings, thinking that they're an attachment. Of course you're going to be attached to them—but it's better to be attached to good things than to things that stir up the mind in harmful ways. In the beginning these feelings of refreshment and rapture come and go seemingly without any pattern. But over time you begin to realize that they do have a pattern. When you get more and more familiar with them, you can tap into them more and more regularly.

Another way of gladdening the mind with the breath is to explore different ways of breathing. Try to think of a way of breathing you never thought of before, and see what it does for the sense of the body. Think of the breath energy coming in, not from the outside, but welling up from within. Or breathing with different parts of the body: breathing with your legs, breathing with your arms, breathing with your fingers. Notice which part of the body has been the neglected stepsister—starved of breath-energy—and focus on giving it as much breath energy and attention as you can. In other words, use your imagination. If you feel patterns of tension in the body, think of a big knife coming through to cut, cut, cut, cut, cut all the patterns of tension.

In other words, use your imagination here—not to wander away in fantasy worlds, but to explore some of the possibilities in the present moment. Try to think of some impossible ways of breathing and then try them—because you can learn a lot about your body that way: what's really possible and what's not. It's like reading about quantum physics. Some of the things they've noticed in their experiments, as far as they can tell, can be explained only by allowing for the idea that certain particles go backwards in time. That explanation required a real leap of the imagination. There's so much out there in the world that's counter-

intuitive. Your sense of the body here in the present moment has a lot of counter-intuitive potentials as well. If you only go with your normal intuition, that's all you see: what you expect to see. See if you can surprise yourself with new ways of thinking about the breath.

So there are lots of different ways of gladdening the mind. As Ajaan Lee said, it's like being a good parent. You need lots of different tricks up your sleeve. If the child cries and all you do is feed it every time it cries, you're going to end up with a fat, grumpy child. Sometimes the child has to go to the bathroom, sometimes it's just bored, sometimes it needs some fresh air, it needs a change of scenery.

If all else fails, and nothing in the meditation seems to cheer you up, go out and walk around for a while. Find a little job to do. Notice some place in the monastery where it's not clean, where things are disorganized, and straighten them out. In other words, learn how to find pleasure in doing skillful things of every sort.

Ajaan Fuang once said that when he was a young monk he used to avoid construction projects around the monastery. He'd help a little bit and then sneak off to meditate. Ajaan Lee never said anything about this until they were preparing for the Buddhist year 2500 and Ajaan Lee was going to hold a big celebration at Wat Asokaram. One day he said to Ajaan Fuang, "If you don't help me I'm going to die, you know." So Ajaan Fuang thought about it for a while and finally said to himself, "Well, construction work in the monastery is a form of skillful activity. If I die with a hammer and saw in my hands—well at least I was using the hammer and saw for good things."

So be the sort of person who's always hunting for something skillful to do, because this lifetime is so short. If you spend your time just being depressed or discouraged, you waste so many opportunities for doing good. There's so much good that needs to be done in the world. Starting from little things, like keeping your surroundings clean and neat, and working on up: It's all worthwhile. There are so many ways you can gladden the mind.

There's a story in one of Ajaan Lee's talks about an old woman who went to the monastery and noticed that the walking meditation paths weren't well swept. So she swept them and set out some water for washing feet. Just that much made her feel cheerful. It so happened that on her way home she had a heart attack and died. The next thing she knew she was a deva, just from the cheerfulness that came from keeping the place around her clean. This story illustrates an important principle: Whatever you can do to gladden the mind in a wholesome and skillful way is part of your repertoire as a good meditator.

Cherish Your Friends

March 12, 2005

Try to make the mind quiet. Try to make the body quiet. There are lots of levels to that quietness. One means sitting quietly—but, of course, the body isn't the only thing making noise and chattering away. The mind is, too. And just as when you want to hear something very subtle you have to sit very quietly, if you want to hear the subtle things going on in your mind you have to make the mind quiet, too. Focus it on the breath. Try to cut down on all the chatter. If you want to talk to yourself, talk about one thing. Talk about the breath.

Ask yourself: Is the breath coming in? Is it going out? When it comes in, how does it feel? Where do you notice it? When it goes out, how does it feel? Where do you notice it? Does it feel good? Does it not? If it doesn't feel good, you can recommend different ways of changing it. Try a little longer, try a little shorter, deeper, more shallow, faster, slower. Find the rhythm and texture of breathing that feels good for the body right now. If you're feeling tired, try to breathe in a way that gives you more energy. If you're feeling tense, try to breathe in a way that's more relaxing.

You can talk about these things to yourself. That kind of chatter is not out of place in the meditation. It's called directed thought and evaluation, which are two of the basic factors for Right Concentration. But otherwise, try to keep the mind as quiet as possible—because you want to notice what's going on. And, of course, what you're going to notice is that there are a lot of other ideas floating through the mind. Sometimes they don't just float. They yell at you. They taunt you. They whisper to you. But you have the power of choice. You can choose which voices to listen to and which ones to put aside. You don't have to believe everything you think. You don't have to obey everything you think. So listen carefully to those voices. You'll begin to realize how much they push your life around. Some of them are well-meaning voices; some of them aren't. You don't know where you've picked up a lot of these ideas that you carry around inside.

One of the functions of meditation is to give you a place to stand inside and listen very carefully so that you can figure out where these things came from. More importantly, you can see where they lead. If you listen to certain thoughts, where are they going to take you? All too often, when a thought comes up in the mind, it's like someone driving up in a car. You're standing on the side of the road, someone drives up and says: "Hop in." And so you hop in without asking, "Where are you going? Who are you?" If we lived our lives that way, we'd be

dead by now. Someone would have driven us to a dark place, robbed us, shot us, and dumped our body out the back door of the car. But that's the normal way things are in the mind. Thoughts come in and you just go with them. So you've got to step back. Ask yourself, "Which thoughts really are my friends? Which ones aren't?" In other words, which ones will lead to your true happiness? Which ones won't?

The chant we recited on friends just now applies both to friends outside and to friends inside. There are true friends; there are false friends. You've got to figure out which is which and to encourage the true friends. Notice that the Buddha said: "Attend to the true friends earnestly." In other words, when you figure out that someone really is a true friend, you want to encourage that person, cherish that person, because true friends are hard to come by.

Years back when I was in Thailand, Ajaan Fuang gave me the job of teaching new monks after I had been a monk five or six years. Every year we'd get a batch of temporary monks coming in, because that's the tradition there, for young men to ordain for about three or four months. There's a textbook for them to study during their period as monks. Toward the end of the book, as they're beginning to think about disrobing, there's a section on lay life. One of the teachings covers who's a true friend and who's a false friend, because this is a big issue in life. The book goes down the list, just as we chanted just now: People who befriend you to cheat you, those who flatter and cajole, those who are your companions in ruinous fun. Those are false friends. As for true friends, the book says, those are the ones who are willing to die in your place.

And every year the comment would come up: There are no true friends in the world. That's not really the case, of course. There are some. But you have to look really, really hard, asking, Where is friendship with this person leading me? As the Buddha said, if you find someone like that, cherish that person. We hear often that the Buddha teaches us non-attachment. Actually he teaches non-clinging, which is a different sort of thing. Clinging is when you hold onto something and create suffering. That, he said, is something you should try to understand. Look for the cause and let go. But in the meantime, you've also got the path, and that's something you try to develop. It's something you hold onto as long as you need it. You develop virtue, concentration, discernment. These are your friends inside. And the same principle applies outside. If you have helpful friends, hold onto them, cherish them. And you try to be a good friend, a true friend, to that person too.

So with regard to the question of holding on and letting go, the Buddha said you've got to be selective. There are four noble truths to life. It's not that you let go of them all. The first truth—the suffering that comes with clinging—is something you want to try to comprehend. The cause of suffering, the craving

that causes you to cling, is something you want to let go. Then there's the path, which you develop. To develop it, you've got to tend to it, you've got to cherish it, you've got to hold onto it. It's like holding onto the rungs of a ladder. If you try to climb up a ladder without holding onto the rungs, you fall off. And even when you reach the roof—or as Ajaan Suwat said, even when you're finished with the path, as far as you are concerned you don't need the path anymore, but you think of the people who will come behind you, and of how easy it is for weeds to grow on the path, how easy it is for the path to get obliterated, so you still tend to it for their sake.

The same way with true friends: If they've helped you, it's not that you leave them behind. You show them gratitude because that's one of the most important lessons you can give to other people. It reminds them that there's something good in life, something that really should be valued, because it's so rare. That's friendship on the outside.

As for friendship on the inside, you want to be friends with your wise qualities inside, the thoughts that help you, that point you in the right direction. You want to learn how to encourage them. After all, meditation is not simply a matter of driving thoughts out of the mind. You first have to learn how to think skillfully. Just listen to all the conversations going on in the mind: Should I meditate? Should I not meditate? Notice all the voices that say, No, I'm too tired, I need my rest, I want to do something else. Ask yourself: Are those your true friends? Where are they going to take you? Learn how to encourage the voices that take you where you really want to go. This is one of the most basic skills in meditation. If you can't master this one, you can't do anything else basic, like sticking with the breath.

For some of us, this is easy. We've had parents who encouraged us and we've learned how to listen to those voices of encouragement. If your parents didn't encourage you, you have to learn how to train yourself to encourage yourself. This is part of what they call emotional intelligence.

Years back there was an Olympic swimmer—Matt Biondi, I think was his name. He was expected to sweep all the medals in the swimming events but he blew the first event. All the commentators said, "That's it. He's probably all shaken up. He's going to go down into a tailspin." But his coach said, "Don't write him off. He's not that kind of person." And sure enough, he won all the remaining events—because even though he could have easily gotten discouraged after the first event, he knew how to talk to himself, to encourage himself, so that he didn't give up. He kept his spirits up and kept performing at his best.

That's what we've got to do as meditators. Learn how to talk to yourself so you can stay on the path. When things are going well, how do you talk to yourself so that you don't get careless? When things are *not* going well, how do

you talk to yourself to give yourself encouragement, to get yourself over those dry patches? That's a basic skill in the meditation: learning who your true friends are inside your mind, and learning how to encourage them.

The Buddha once said that friendship with good people is the whole of the practice. On the external level that means staying with people who can teach you the practice—because without them, how would you know what to do? On your own, could you think up the path that the Buddha found? Would you have the stamina to stick with it? The example of other people who have trod the path is what keeps you going. On the internal level, friendship with good people means your ability to figure out who inside your head is your friend, and to cherish that friend, encourage it, listen to it. That ability, more than anything else, is what keeps you on course.

Your Inner Mob

September 6, 2005

The mind is like a town meeting: lots of people, lots of different opinions. Sometimes the town meeting is well run—people are reasonable, courteous—but often it goes out of control. People start shouting, and a kind of mob psychology takes over. If you're standing outside the mob, it's easy enough to see that the people are crazy, but if you get down in a mob with enough people who believe, say, that somebody's a witch, you can end up setting her on fire. And then after it's all over you say, "Gee, how did that happen?"

It's the same with the mind. Every now and then some crazy idea comes and takes hold of every voice in the mind, and the only way you can *not* get swept up in the craziness is to step outside. Unfortunately, there's no little compartment in your head outside of your brain where you can go to escape the voices. You're in there with them. But there is an aspect of your awareness that's separate from these voices, and finding it is a really important skill in the meditation.

There are states of mind that the Buddha called "hindrances," which can come sweeping through the mind. The problem with each of them—sensual desire, ill will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, or uncertainty—is that it blinds you. You start seeing things in line with the hindrance and you lose sight of what's genuinely for your own true benefit. In other words, when sensual desire comes along, the object *really is* attractive, and you can't stand not pursuing it. When ill will comes along, the person that you don't like is *really* a bad person. That's how it seems. When sleepiness comes, you can talk yourself into falling asleep, taking an extra nap, waking up and turning over and falling back to sleep again, because the body *really needs sleep* at a time like that. And so on down the list. And yet after the hindrance has passed, you look back on it and realize that you didn't really have to follow through with it. You could have done perfectly well not following the object of your lust or desire. You could have done perfectly well without doing anything nasty to the person that you don't like. It's just that, at the time, your perceptions were skewed.

The Buddha compares each of the hindrances to a different kind of water. Sensual desire is water with dye in it. Say there's red dye in the water: The things in the water look red, but when you take them out, they're not. It was just the dye in the water. Ill will is like boiling water. If you try to look down into boiling water you can't see anything clearly because of the turbulence. Torpor and lethargy are like water filled with algae. Restlessness and anxiety are water

ruffled by the wind. Uncertainty is like water in the dark. Even though the water may be clear by its nature, it's not in a situation where you can see anything in it.

When the mind is seized by these hindrances, you can't really see things for what they are. So you've got to learn how to recognize the hindrances when they come and realize that you don't want to get involved with them. If you can catch them in time, in their very early stages, you can realize, "This is a hindrance. This is nothing to get involved with." You can separate yourself out. This is one of *the* basic skills that you need, not only as a meditator, but also to survive in life.

When I visited Ajaan Suwat that last time—he'd had some brain damage in his automobile accident—he mentioned that he had the mindfulness to know when his brain wasn't functioning right. He said that his brain was giving him all sorts of weird perceptions. But because he'd been a good meditator, he had developed the mindfulness not to fall in with them. This was very different from my father, who developed Parkinson's dementia as he got older. He'd see big animals in the house and people committing suicide out in the yard—all kinds of disturbing things. You'd try to talk him into realizing that they were all illusions, but he wouldn't believe you. If there was a black dog in the living room, there was a black dog in the living room no matter what evidence you could show that there wasn't. This is the difference between a mind that's trained and a mind that's not.

So you have to nip these things in the bud. Otherwise a mob psychology takes over in the mind, and it's not just voices screaming in your head, but also changes in your body. The blood starts racing faster, the heart's racing faster, different feelings of tension and pressure arise in different parts of the body. When you're angry, there's a weird feeling in your gut. And because there are the physical symptoms you say, "Gee, this must be what I really feel." But that's not the case. It's just your hormones running amok. A hormone gets into your blood and it keeps circulating around in your body even after the particular mind state is gone. You've gotten used to the idea that if you've been angry and the physical symptoms of anger are still in the body, then you must still be angry. That makes room for the thought of anger to come back in and take over again. So one thing to remind yourself of is, "It's just the hormones in the blood, and the actual thought of anger comes and goes." It's the same with all the other hindrances.

Just because there's a physical symptom doesn't mean that the emotion is especially real. It's like people presenting arguments. I've been reading through a critique of the monks' rules book right now and the person writing the critique has some strong arguments as well as some weak ones. The strong arguments are the ones where he simply points out, "This is a mistranslation," and that's it.

When the arguments are weak, that's when he starts getting belligerent, throwing in a lot of emotion.

This is the way the mind works. When a particular defilement knows that it has a weak case, it shouts and it screams and it uses every trick it can think of in order to push you into following it. So when things come on that strong, learn to recognize them just as the hype of the defilements, in the same way that you learn to see through the hype in an advertisement. If all else fails, just hunker down, for sometimes when these things come on really strong they've got to run their course. All you can do is make up your mind that you're not going to fall in line with them, you're not going to act under their power, and you just hunker down with the breath. Don't get involved in the conversations. Don't get pulled into a shouting match.

It's like that storm we had several years back, with hundred-mile-per-hour winds: There was nothing you could do except stay in your tent or your hut and wait for the storm to pass. In the morning, when the winds had died down, you could come out, survey the damage, and figure out what needed to be done, but while the wind was blowing it was hard to figure out anything at all. So when these strong emotions come blowing through the mind, just try to keep yourself separate. Hunker down.

Ajaan Lee has a good way of viewing these things. He says, "You don't know who's actually speaking in your mind. You've got all those little germs in your blood. Maybe the thoughts in your mind are the thoughts of the little germs passing through your brain. Or you may have seen cases of people actually possessed by a spirit. Maybe this is a spirit coming and trying to possess your mind." In other words, learn how not to identify with these crazy voices. Ask yourself: If you actually followed through with that particular voice, where would it take you? And if you start getting crazy answers to that question, you realize, "It's impossible to have a conversation here." Just hunker down. Wait for the storm to pass. Wait for the craziness of the mob psychology to run its course, but the important thing is that you don't become part of the mob.

If you can gain this kind of perspective on your thoughts, you can save yourself a lot of grief. As that bumper sticker says, "Don't believe everything you think." Don't *identify* with everything that's coming through your mind. Don't fall for the hype of the defilements pressing their case. When these things get really strong, just hold onto the breath for dear life. When the storm is past you'll be glad that you didn't allow yourself to get swept away.

Mindstorms

December 1, 2004

There's a part of the mind that's just aware. No matter what else comes into the mind—greed, anger, delusion, despair, depression, regret, or fear—it's just *part* of the mind. There's also another part that's just aware of these things, but it tends to get blocked out when strong emotions come in. Still, it's always there, like the hum of the refrigerator always there in the background. Or maybe a better analogy would be the hum of the Big Bang, the deep B-flat that's still detectable from all directions all the time.

One of the tricks of the meditation is learning to get in touch with that part of the mind, not to regard it as something exotic, but to have it as the background state of mind, the basis of your conscious awareness. This requires a shift of your center of gravity, because for the most part we tend to live in our emotions, in our creations, in the little worlds we create for ourselves. But as the Buddha pointed out, there's a lot of suffering in those worlds. They all require effort to keep them going. They have to feed off of something. When the Buddha says that becoming is conditioned by clinging, the word "clinging" can also mean feeding or the act of taking sustenance. And the sustenance is the passion of desire—the desire that makes us create these worlds, that pulls us into these worlds, and impels us to take them as far as they can go. There's always an act of feeding going on—and it's stressful.

So you've got to learn how to get out of those little worlds you've created for yourself. Otherwise you can create huge emotional storms that can blow you away. People talk about sitting and meditating and being blown away to the point where they can't even sit anymore, but if you actually look at the wind from the outside, there's no physical wind blowing them off the seat. It's just that they let these emotional storms get blown up in the mind and they put themselves *in* the storms, so of course they're going to get blown around. What's important to remember is that there's always an awareness surrounding the storms. If you can place your center of gravity in that awareness, you don't get blown away.

It's not that difficult to get out of the storms if you can observe them as they arise, as they're just beginning, but they're hard to extract yourself from if they're already full-blown. So you need to learn how to change your center of gravity in advance and keep it changed. Otherwise the secondary storms—the ones that blow in on the tail of the first storm—can catch you off guard. One of the

problems is the impatience that blows up as a separate storm. You get impatient: When are these storms going to go away? And then you place yourself in that second storm, the impatient storm, and that can blow you away as well. Or you can get swept up in a storm of boredom. A lot of these secondary storms are the ones that throw mediators off balance, so you have to watch out for them. Remember that there's a space around those storms as well. You have to learn how to watch those from the outside, too.

A great deal of the commentary going on in the mind is just this sort of thing. You pull yourself out of the storms whirling around events from the past or future, but then you let yourself get caught up in storms of the present. When these things come up—regret or impatience or whatever—just watch them. They may seem awfully powerful and awfully real, but you can learn to question their reality. Remember that although there may be a reality to these things, it's a created reality—false, artificial. It's something you're creating right now, and you may not even be aware of what you're doing.

Back when I was younger I use to like to write fiction. Basically what a fiction writer does is to inhabit a little mental world, exploring what it feels like from inside. The more real you can make that world to yourself, the better the story when you write it down. What's uncanny about these worlds is that sometimes a character you create can surprise you. The more real the character becomes in your mind, the more it can start doing unexpected things. When that happens, you start thinking: "Maybe this character has its own reality," but it's actually a figment of your own imagination. The reason these characters can surprise you is the same reason that you get surprised by things coming into the mind in normal world-creating thoughts. You're so oblivious to what you're doing that it can actually surprise you. That's when these thoughts begin to seem very real, to have an independent existence. What's happened, though, is that the part of your mind creating them is behind a wall, separated from the part that's watching them. That's why they can take unexpected turns.

This is why we have to get the mind really, really quiet—both so that we can get closer and closer to the part of the mind that simply observes, and to get clearer about where these fabrications are coming from. When you can see that second part in operation, it offers no surprises. And when you get to the point where fabrications offer no surprises, you start getting disenchanted with them. You see them for all their artificiality. You can begin to pull yourself out of their worlds more and more consistently.

So whatever storms come brewing up in the mind, remember: It's just an event in your awareness, and there's an awareness surrounding it, outside of the storm. Learn how to give more weight to that awareness than to the storms. If you're going to identify with anything—and it's natural that we do identify with

things all along the path—learn how to identify with that very still awareness. It may not seem very intelligent, very creative, but it's your salvation. It's what you can hold onto that'll keep you from getting blown away.

How many times have you seen people who are very clever, very imaginative, very creative, and then something takes on an independent life in their minds and they can actually end up killing themselves, simply because of their thought-creations. They find themselves pushed into all sorts of weird and self-destructive behavior simply because they can't let go of particular thought-worlds in their minds.

So for the survival of all that's good and worthwhile in your own mind, you've got to learn how to step out of these things, realizing that although that simple awareness may not seem interesting or clever, it's your real friend. And there's a wisdom in learning how to stay there and watch, watch, watch, not to be impatient to get results, not to be impatient to see how things turn out. Learn how to be more stable in that watching, because the stability is what will allow you to see very subtle things, to see the tricks the mind plays on itself, the places where it pulls the curtain down or throws up walls to maintain its illusions. Your steady gaze is what's going to enable you to see through those illusions.

In the early stages of the meditation, that basic watcher—the observer—may seem as unstable and as fragile as any of the other worlds you might create. But as you get more and more used to placing your center of gravity here, you find that it's a lot easier to stay here than to keep creating those other worlds. This awareness, too, is a kind of world, and there will come a point where you have to take it apart, but in the mean time, this is the most stable world at your disposal. Over time, your center of gravity can begin to shift more and more in this direction. Once it's here, the qualities of stability and patience and endurance come a lot easier, and you come to value them more. Although they themselves may not seem all that surprising or entertaining, they do allow you to find out some very surprising things about the mind. In particular, you learn how to see through this process of creation. Where do these worlds come from? This is how the Buddha discovered dependent co-arising, by just watching very patiently, putting himself in a position where he didn't get blown away.

It's like really good scholarship. Everyone wants to get in on the dialogue of common scholarly assumptions and show that, yes, they can engage in that dialogue as well. But the people who say, "Well, stop. Wait a minute. These questions don't make sense. Something's wrong here": Those are the ones who bring a real advance in knowledge. When you step back to get out of a particular dialogue, you begin to see its underlying assumptions for what they are.

The same thing goes on in the mind. There are little signals and signs that the mind sends to itself, and you feel clever in catching their meaning: "Yes, I

understand that signal, I understand that sign, I'll play along with that." And then you get sucked into the world of those signals and signs. But it takes real understanding not to get sucked in by the signals, to step out of the worlds that those signals create.

Ajaan Suwat once said that one of his greatest insights in meditation was seeing how the mind liked to play make-believe with itself. You have these little internal signals and agreements—"Well, this is this and that's that"—and suddenly there's a whole world of becoming, just because you thought you were clever in interpreting and catching on to the signs. So sometimes it's good to play dumb, to say, "I don't understand this, this doesn't make sense." And step back.

That right there is a lot of the practice.

The Story behind Impatience

November 20, 2005

Back when I was in college I majored in history. One of the big frustrations about majoring in history was that you felt you could never really get to see what it was really like back in the days you were studying about. Studying about the 13th century—what was it really like? Think about all the generalizations they make about 13th century culture in Europe, and yet having lived through the 20th and into the 21st centuries what kind of generalizations would you say really do justice to the reality of that kind of experience? How can you sum up a century in a sentence or two? The more you read the stories that make up history, the more you realize they can never take you back there.

It's good to reflect on this, because look at how we live our lives: We tend to live in the narratives that we make about things—what happened in the past, what we would like to see happen in the future, what's the basic story line, looking for development, looking for closure. How much does that story line really have to do with reality? How much does it actually stand in the way of our seeing reality? Think about that, especially as you meditate.

There are ways of telling the story of your life that help get you into the meditation. For example, you can look at your past suffering, recognizing that a lot of it was caused by your own unskillful habits, and come to the conclusion that your skillful habits need some work. That kind of story helps bring you into the meditation. But there are a lot of other stories that pull you away. You've got to watch out for those, because they make you impatient. They make you less observant about what's actually going on.

You sit here working with your breath. Maybe in the back of the mind there's the thought, "Let's just get this over and done with so we can move onto the next stages, which are a lot more interesting." So you're not really looking at your breath. You're looking at your plans for the next stage or thinking about what's going to happen tomorrow or what's going to happen the day after that. You're looking at your thoughts about how much longer you're going to have to be stuck with this until you get results. That's the kind of story that gets in the way of actually seeing what's happening right here and now.

So when you see those thoughts arising, learn how to put them away. This can be hard because a lot of our sense of who we are is in the story. This is an area where the teaching on not-self is useful: to see how artificial and made-up

our sense of who we are is and how it gets in the way of the work we need to do in the present moment.

People sometimes believe that the whole purpose of the meditation is to get into the present moment and just stay there. The Buddha never talked like that. He always said, “There’s work to be done in the present moment.” That’s why you get here. You want to settle down here with the purpose of understanding the intentions acting here in the present moment, because that’s the only place where you can really *observe* your intentions in action. If there’s any greed, anger, or delusion in the intention, you’re going to see it only in the present moment.

After it’s passed, that intention is just a memory—and you know how memory tends to color things depending on what you want to see, how it fits into a good or bad narrative about yourself. But it’s just a narrative. There’s no guarantee that it’s going to get you to the reality of the intention. The only way you can really see is by looking in the present moment.

And when the present moment is full of distractions, don’t think of the process of dealing with your distractions as getting in the way of where you want to go. If you see it simply as getting in the way, you’re going to overlook it and try to push through it blindly. Instead, see it as, “This is the spot where the Awakening is going to happen, where the understanding is going to happen, and through the process of watching the breath, catching the mind as it wanders off, and bringing it back, *that’s* where all the insights are going to arise.” In other words, the problems in the present are not something you simply want to push your way through or get out of the way; they’re something you want to look into—because the Buddha had an amazing insight about the present.

You may have heard the story that, after the night of his Awakening, he spent 49 days experiencing the bliss of release. Not only bliss: He learned an awful lot in the course of those 49 days. You may also know the story of when he was in the forest of simsapa trees. Simsapa trees have tiny, tiny leaves, about the size of a dime. And he scooped up a handful of them from the forest floor and asked the monks, “Which is more, the leaves in my hand or the leaves in the forest?” The monks replied, “Of course, the leaves in the forest are many more than the leaves in your hand.” And the Buddha said, “In the same way, what I learned in the course of my Awakening is like the leaves in the forest. What I have brought out to teach is like the leaves in my hand.” And he focused on the four noble truths as being the leaves in his hand.

There are other passages where he boiled down the basic insight he gained in his Awakening even further: It’s a simple principle of causality. When you think of all the amazing things he could have talked about, it’s interesting that this is the one he found most worthwhile to teach. His insight was basically that our experience is based on two kinds of causal patterns. One is that when x exists, y

exists with it; when x ceases, y does, too. In other words, these things come and go together. This is causality happening right in the present moment. The other principle is that from the arising of x comes the arising of y ; from the passing away of x comes the passing away of y . This connection doesn't have to happen immediately in the present moment. It can occur over time. When you put these two principles together, they mean that any moment of experience is the combination of three things: the cause arising in the present, plus the effects of that cause, and effects coming in from the past.

And what is that cause? Your present intention. And where are the effects from the past coming from? Past intentions. This means we have free will. Our intentions shape our life. At any moment we can choose what to focus on, what to do, what to say, what to think. We're not *compelled* by the past. There are influences coming in from the past, but we can choose which influences we're going to let pass, which one's we're going to work on, which ones we're going to pick up, and what we're going to do with them. That's what the whole fabric of our experience of time and space comes from: the constant input coming from intention. And the Buddha's insight was that if you look at where the new input is coming from, you'll see the way out. And where are you going to see that new input? Right here, right at the intentions in the present moment. You really want to get to know these well.

The best way to get to know your intentions is to set up one intention to see how long you can keep it going, and to see what other intentions are going to come in and try to change it. Then you learn the skills needed to maintain that original intention—as long as it was a good one. Here the intention is to stay with the breath, and to think about the breath, to evaluate the breath, to make it more comfortable so that you can stay here longer, to give more support to your original intention.

As you get more and more sensitive to the breath, you find that you also get more and more sensitive to those intentions. Those are the real causal factors in your life. What's dismaying about them, especially in the beginning of the practice, is to see how random they are. This little intention fires off and goes in one direction, and then another one comes and goes in the exact opposite direction, or other ones come from all over the place. But don't let yourself get discouraged when you see this. Learn the skills you need to focus on a skillful intention and stay there in the midst of all this randomness.

The randomness helps remind you how artificial your storyline is. Storylines, if they're going to maintain your interest, have to have a clean trajectory. There may be a few setbacks here and there to make the story interesting, but eventually there's one overall trajectory. It's like the basic shape of a melody. It may be an arc. It may be a valley between two peaks. And the individual notes

may play around with that, go outside of the basic arc a bit, but there's a basic shape to what we hear. That's what makes the melody satisfying. When we're creating a narrative out of our lives, we're trying to string together only the intentions that make sense, that seem to fit into a basic shape, but when you meditate, look at what you've got here: intentions running all over the place.

That's an important insight right there. Even though it's the dismaying insight that comes from seeing how unconcentrated your mind is, it's a valuable insight. If you take it to heart and use it skillfully, it'll help deconstruct any narratives that are getting in the way of your practice. This way you'll find it easier to settle down with less and less distraction. When you can let go of the narratives, there's really a lot here to discover. Whether the meditation goes well or not, whether it goes in line with your expectations or not, that's just another narrative.

The important thing is that you really look at what's right here, right now, particularly with regard to your intentions. You have your intention to stay with the breath, and, whoops, there's another intention going off someplace else. Bring your focus back to the breath. You've learned something about the mind right there. The act of bringing it back strengthens your original intention, strengthens your resolve, and the fact that you're able to catch the mind as it's wandering off strengthens your mindfulness and alertness.

So whether things are progressing at the rate you'd like to see in your ideal narrative, that's not the point. The point is that you're looking and you're learning. Sometimes you may have more lessons to learn than you originally thought, but if you don't start from where you are, where are you going to start from? If the picture of what your mind is doing in the present moment doesn't fit into your ideal narrative, maybe it's time to question the narrative and not get impatient with the present moment.

Because what is impatience? Impatience is the part of the narrative that makes us judgmental in an unskillful way. We need our powers of judgment, but what turns powers of judgment, of being judicious, into being judgmental is that we get impatient. We want to come to a decision really quickly before all the evidence is in, and as a result the judgment is useless—one more obstacle in the way of seeing things as they actually are.

So give the present moment some space. Don't push it too hard, thinking you've got to get this or that result in this or that amount of time. Really look at what's going on here without impatience, without the narrative that gives the push to impatience. That's when you'll get to see what's interesting and unplanned—because the spot where intention enters into the causal pattern, the route by which it enters in, is also the route by which you're going to get out.

And it's right here. It's not in the past, it's not in the future, it's right here. Allow yourself to settle down right here, and that way you'll get to see it, to know it, and to follow it to release.

Little Things

July, 2003

Patience is an important quality in the practice. The Pali word for patience, *khanti*, also means endurance, the willingness to stick with things over the long haul. And although the practice *is* a long haul, this willingness to stick with things over the long haul translates into the present moment as meticulousness. You're very careful in the steps you're following right now, step by step by step, not jumping over any steps, not trying to leap from the first floor to the fifth. You're willing to go up the stairway, one step at a time, paying careful attention to what you're doing. You're willing to put your trust in the little things you can do in the present moment, confident that they'll build into the bigger results you want.

We all want the big results. We want major happiness, major peace, major clarity in our minds. When we look at the step-by-step-by-step increments we have to follow, we sometimes get impatient and don't trust them. How could little things like this build up to such big things as release, liberation, nibbana? That's what we think. And yet it's precisely the little unskillful things that get in the way of the big results we want, so we have to pay careful attention to them each time the mind pulls away from the desire for peace or the desire for true happiness. It's a little pull, but over time it adds up to a major habit. The best way to fight this habit is with a path that's made out of little steps that add up over time as well. At the same time, the willingness to look at the details means that your powers of perception, your powers of insight, get very sharp.

There are times when your practice seems to hit a plateau and it's not going anywhere. At times like that, if you turn around to look at what you've been doing, you'll realize that you haven't been looking very carefully. In other words, your meditation has been put on automatic pilot and you're not paying much attention. You're just going through the motions, so the results just go through the motions as well. The cure for this lies in being very sensitive and precise about what you're doing.

For example, focusing on the breath: Be really precise about any tiny little bit of tension or discomfort or dis-ease in the breath. Don't slough over it, because paying attention to the little details is what brings you more and more into the present moment. If you're sloughing over the details, you're sloughing from the past into the future and skipping over the present. So pay close attention to each breath, to how the process of each breath feels in different parts of the body. As

you develop your sensitivity, working through whatever tension you detect, you move from where it's really tense to where it's less and less tense, until things are so calm that you can detect even the slightest bit of tension. Work through it, work through it, even though it may seem like a little thing. If you leave it, it may turn out to be a seed. It may grow into something larger.

There's a story in the Canon of a creeper seed that lands next to a sala tree. The devas in the other trees come around to comfort the deva in the sala tree, saying, "Have no fear. Have no fear. Don't worry about that seed. Maybe a fire will burn it or a woodsman will chop it or step on it or a peacock will eat it or maybe it's not even a seed." Well, it turns out to be a seed. It sprouts and grows into a creeper, and the creeper grows up around the tree. At first the deva in the sala tree doesn't understand why her friends were so concerned. After all, the creeper's tendrils seem soft, downy, and tender. But then as the creeper grows bigger and bigger, it finally forms a canopy over the whole tree, pulls down the major limbs, and destroys the tree. That's when the deva realized why her friends were so concerned.

This is one of the reasons why you have to be careful about little things, because sometimes they're seeds that can grow. At the same time, when you're attentive to little things, you're beginning to plant your own seeds in the mind as well, different kinds of seeds: seeds of stronger mindfulness, stronger alertness, stronger willpower, determination. All the perfections needed for Awakening start with the little things, and they keep growing in little steps, little steps, through your being very, very attentive, very, very precise in what you're doing. At the same time, though, you can't be tense in what you're doing. You just watch things very carefully.

This is why there's so much emphasis on keeping a broad sense of awareness in the meditation. If your awareness gets very narrow and tense, it's hard to maintain. But if your range of awareness is broad and yet your attention to the details of your focus is precise and sharp, that state of awareness is not just easy to sustain. It sustains itself and becomes a source of strength for the mind. In that way, it sustains you.

You want to apply this same attention to detail to all aspects of your life—not only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed but also when you're dealing with other people, doing work out in the orchard or at the guesthouse, whatever your activity. You want to be as precisely with the present moment as possible, so that skillful or unskillful states when they arise in the mind don't pass by unnoticed. This is what it means to be uncomplacent in your practice of concentration. As we chanted just now, "One who sees danger and respects being heedful." Well, the danger comes from little things, because little things can turn into big things and sneak up on you from behind.

There's another passage in the Canon where the Buddha describes four things you shouldn't overlook simply because they're small. One is a small fire; another is a small snake; another is a small prince—the prince may be small right now but in a couple of years he can grow up and he can carry a grudge from age three to who knows how far. The fourth one is a young contemplative, because sometimes young contemplatives have gotten further in their meditation than you might assume. If you treat them with disrespect, that disrespect can backfire on you. Those are outside small things that you shouldn't be careless or complacent about.

The inside ones, though, are even smaller and yet they can do even more damage, on the unskillful side. On the other side, small skillful things can do you a lot of good if you look after them. So don't despise the little victories you achieve in your meditation, don't be careless about the little defeats, because it's step by step by step that you get more and more precisely into the present moment, which is where things are going to open up. If you're not paying careful attention here, you're not going to see the opening. So focusing on the little things is not a distraction from the larger issues of the practice. It's actually in the little things that the larger ones appear.

So always keep this point in mind, especially when your meditation has hit a plateau or seems to be sliding downhill. Often it's a problem of not paying careful attention, of simply going through the motions. Ajaan Suwat would often describe this as not having enough respect for the little things that you're doing each moment. So try to meditate with an attitude of lightness, but at the same time a sense of respect, of real dedication. That's how the principles of endurance and patience, which sound like long-term principles, translate into the present moment: being meticulous in what you're doing right here, right now.

Nuclear Thinking

January, 2003

Thoughts come and go, but we keep trying to make them stay. In fact we've gotten pretty good at making them stay. Without that habit, we wouldn't be able to speak, to hold conversations, to think anything through. So this habit has its uses, but also its drawbacks. It can weigh us down with all kinds of suffering, all kinds of stress when the mind goes overboard in its thinking.

The skill in meditation is learning how to think when you want to, how not to think when you don't. It's not a process of putting yourself into a totally blank state where no thinking is ever possible. At the same time, it's not a process of ceaseless thinking. It means learning the right time and the place for your thoughts.

The problem is that the mind keeps churning out thoughts at the wrong time and the wrong place—thoughts you don't want, but they still come in. Sometimes it seems that the less you want them, the more insistent they are in coming. This shows that you've left an opening for them. But before you can see this opening to find exactly what you're doing that admits those thoughts, that's fascinated by them, you have to get the mind as quiet as you can. This is why, in the process of meditation, there's a rhythm between periods when you want to keep the mind as quiet as possible, and others when you want to investigate and explore. There's a rhythm to the practice. And the mind has its own rhythms, too. Sometime it seems like nothing is going on in the mind; at other times there seems to be nothing but disturbance. The skill in the practice lies in learning how to make use of whatever level of concentration you've got to deal with wherever you are in the rhythm of the mind. In periods when the thoughts seem to be few and far between, you can't let yourself be complacent. Build up your concentration as solidly as you can so that, when the next wave of really obsessive thinking washes over the mind, you'll have stronger tools for dealing with it, stronger tools for not getting swept away.

When thoughts come in, remind yourself that there's always a part of the mind that's not involved in the thinking. This is easier to realize when you've been working on developing a large frame of reference for your concentration. Once the breath gets comfortable, immediately expand it and let that comfortable sensation spread to other parts of the body. Get used to having this enlarged frame, for otherwise, if your mind is totally one-pointed, focused on being aware of only one little point of the body, it gets easily knocked over. One thought can

come in and totally overwhelm that one little point without much effort at all. You suddenly find yourself with your concentration destroyed, and your mind splashing all over the place.

But if your area of awareness has a broader base—all the way from the feet up to the head, all around the body—and if you think of your awareness as a porous space, then when the thoughts come and go there's space for them to go through without running into anything. They just go out the other side. That way your concentration doesn't get knocked over by the thoughts, both because it's large and because it doesn't put up a surface of resistance. You could put up that surface if you want, and sometimes it's wise to, but sometimes it seems to make the thoughts more obstreperous. So if you have to let them in, okay let them in, but then just let them go.

Think of the body as a large field of energy. There's nothing solid there. A thought comes in and has nothing to run against, so it runs out the other side. This way you begin to realize that there's nothing you necessarily have to fear about thinking. You have the choice of focusing on your thoughts, or not, whichever you want. When you realize that you always have another place to focus, you can have control over your thinking. You just switch back to that mode of that enlarged awareness and stay, leaving the thoughts to pass away on their own.

Now don't think that that enlarged awareness is the Buddha's unconditioned. It's more like his reference to the word "*dhatu*," which means property. Back in the Buddha's time they talked about the different properties that make up the body, different properties found in the mind. The basic idea behind the concept of *dhatu* or property is closer to our word, "potential." There's a potential that gives rise to things when it gets aggravated, disturbed, or provoked. When there's no provocation, everything stays very still. This is how they explained fire. They said that the fire potential lies latent in everything. If you stir it up with a little friction from a fire stick—or nowadays with a match—that aggravates the fire potential and it bursts into flame. But even when it's not aggravated, the potential is still there.

The mind is like that. There's a potential for thinking in every little cell of the body, it seems. In every little speck of your awareness there's the potential for a thought to arise if it gets provoked. When things are still and empty in the mind, it's simply because nothing's been provoked. It doesn't mean that there's no possibility of new things' coming out. It's just that they haven't been aggravated. Sometimes there's a strong sense of light that goes along with the stillness and, again, that's not the light of the unconditioned. It's the light of these potentials, their energy, just waiting to be provoked.

So even when nothing seems to be going on in the mind, don't get complacent. Keep trying to develop your concentration even further. Develop this sense of space so that you're really proficient at it, so that you can maintain it all the time. Develop a 360-degree sense of awareness so that when something *does* get provoked, you're quick to see it. Part of you will say "Oh, I thought there was nothing there," but the potential for disturbance has been there all along.

It's like children in a classroom—at least back in the old days, when teachers had some authority. As long as the teacher was in the classroom, the kids were quiet. They'd wait until the teacher left the room before they'd start running around. If the teacher came back in, they'd sit down and get quiet again.

My older brother tells a story from when he was in grade school. He had a really sharp teacher, Mrs. Lane. One day she left the classroom and went downstairs to the restroom to have a smoke. The kids, of course, started running around the classroom until they heard her coming back up the stairs. Everybody then sat down very quietly—except for my brother, who was so excited that he continued running around. So, of course, he got caught. Later, after the class, Mrs. Lane took him aside and said, "Look, Galen. You've got to learn how to be sneaky. Listen for when I come up the stairs and then stop running around." She was a sharp teacher. Even though she was downstairs in the restroom, she knew what was going on upstairs. But she was also wise. The way she spoke to him gave my brother the feeling that she was on his side. She knew he wanted to have some fun and she was showing him how to do it in a harmless way.

Mindfulness and alertness are like teachers of the mind, and you've got to train them to be sharp and wise. When alert mindfulness fills the body, fills your awareness, then your random thoughts get very quiet. But your thoughts are sneaky. As soon as mindfulness slips a little bit, a new thought forms in the corner. Then it spreads out to fill up all the areas abandoned by your mindful awareness. But if you can re-establish that larger frame, that larger field of awareness, the thought can go through the field and not do any damage. It can do its thing, but it won't knock over the frame. But this means that you've got to be very alert, very non-complacent. And that requires work.

Then again, that's what concentration is: It's work. But at least it's pleasant work, work in the right direction, giving us a frame of reference from which we can look at our thoughts with more detachment, with less involvement, less identification. This doesn't mean that there's no sense of identification at all, though. Actually, you've just switched your identification. Instead of identifying with the thoughts, you identify with that larger frame, that larger field of brightened awareness. No matter how much you contemplate the teachings on not-self, the process of identification doesn't end all at once. It moves from things that are blatant and obvious to things more subtle and refined. Only when

you've pared it down consistently to the refined level can you let it go entirely. The important point at the beginning is that you learn how to use it so that you don't latch on to things that are blatantly harmful: thoughts that pull you off into greed, anger, and delusion, thoughts that stir up any of the unskillful potentials in your mind.

So this particular step in the meditation—once the breath gets comfortable, start spreading your awareness to fill the whole body and then allow that comfortable breath to fill the whole body as well—is an extremely important part of the meditation. In the Buddha's 16 steps for breath meditation, step number three is just this step: You train yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body. The Buddha puts this step right up there toward the beginning because it's so fundamental. When he talks about a mind in concentration, he calls it *mahagattam cittam*—enlarged awareness.

The images he gives for the states of right concentration are all images of enlargement. When you're first allowing that sense of ease and pleasure to permeate the body, he says it's like a bathman or a bathman's apprentice, who would knead water through a ball of bath powder. Back in those days, they didn't have soap; they had a powder, like flour, to bathe with. They'd make a dough out of the powder by kneading water into it until no part of the ball of dough was dry, and yet the water wouldn't ooze or drip out. This is the stage of working the initial sense of ease and pleasure throughout your whole body.

In the second and third levels of jhana there's a similar process but with less effort. You let the pleasure or rapture corresponding to that state permeate, pervade your whole awareness, suffuse your whole body. The image given by the Buddha is of a spring of cool water welling up from the bottom of a lake, permeating the entire lake. As for the third jhana, which is more quiet and less of an intensely rapturous state, he said that it's like lotuses submerged in a still lake, permeated entirely by the water of the lake from their roots to the tips of their buds. With the fourth jhana, the image is of a person with a bright cloth covering the whole body, the same way your bright awareness fills the whole body.

So it's obvious from these images that jhana is a state of broadened awareness. And this broadened awareness is really important. For one thing, it gives you a firm basis so that you don't get knocked over by distracting thoughts. At the same time, it allows your vision to become more all-around, 360 degrees all-around, so that you're aware of all the little potentials in the body, all the little potentials in the mind that can get provoked in one way or another.

That way you can be quicker and quicker to see the very early stages of provocation. When the slightest stirring comes, you'll notice it. It's not quite a physical stirring at first, nor is it really mental. It's on the borderline between the two. When you latch onto it, there will be a little bit of tension that you create in

the body to provide a place for the mind to stay latched on. This is how the stirring turns into a swelling. In this way, thinking is both a mental and physical process. If you have this broadened state of awareness, you can dissolve the little swelling before it turns into a thought and can take over your whole awareness. As you stay with the breath energy in the whole body, you're operating right on the borderline between body and mind, between physical and mental phenomena—right where those thought-potentials begin to swell. You can deal more quickly with the beginning of anything, any potential that would come either in the body or the mind.

This is why concentration is such an important state for gaining insight—because it improves your vision. Your vision becomes more all-around, more precise, focused on the area where things get provoked, this interface between body and mind. Then, if you want to think, you can think. If you don't, you don't have to. When the time comes to think, the mind will have been properly rested. Your thinking will be a lot clearer, more to the point. When the time comes to stop, you keep your thinking under control. It doesn't keep riding out in all directions.

Most people's thinking is like an uncontrolled nuclear chain reaction. One little neutron shoots out, runs into another nucleus, which sends out more neutrons, which keep on multiplying until suddenly the whole thing explodes. Concentration is like exerting control over the reaction, building a reactor and inserting graphite rods to make sure the reactions don't go out of control. If you want to shut everything down, you can insert all the rods all the way in, and everything will be still. That doesn't mean that the potential for a reaction isn't there, just that it's been stilled. If you need to think, pull the rods out a little bit to get just the reaction you want. When the thinking has done its work, you push the rods back in. This way, when thoughts come and go, you get whatever use you want out of them. They don't take over your mind. You stay in charge.

Stepping Back

May 13, 2005

When you meditate, it's easy to get frustrated. Here you are, looking at the breath, and as Ajaan Lee says, "Just *four* concentrations, and you can't master them." The mind keeps slipping off, and no matter how determined you are to stay with the breath, you find yourself someplace else. Often it doesn't seem like the meditation's heading in any particular direction—just kind of mucking around—and you wonder, "What does this have to do with the Deathless? What does this have to do with true happiness?" That's when it's time to step back and look at the larger perspective.

The big issue of course is your mind. No matter where you live, no matter where you go, you've got the mind right there. If you can't keep it under any kind of control at all, you're living with something very dangerous because all kinds of things can happen to it. A slight chemical imbalance in the body and the mind gets really depressed. It can't seem to pull itself out of the depression. Or it starts hallucinating. There are all sorts of things the mind can do, all kinds of things the brain can do.

It's important to keep a distinction between the mind and the brain. The brain is the physical organ, while the part of the mind we're interested in is just basic awareness. We use the organ to think, but if the organ is damaged in any way, out of balance in any way, then our thoughts become our enemies. And what are you going to do then? If you have enough mindfulness to pull yourself out of your thought worlds, you're safe. If you have enough mindfulness to pull yourself out of *anything* the mind does, you're safe.

We talk about the mind clinging, the mind hanging on to things, but it doesn't have hands to cling. When it "clings to something" it just keeps thinking about it over and over and over again, it keeps wanting it over and over and over again. To let go of the clinging means that you just let it stop. And the only way you can let it stop is to get out of it and see it simply as an event in the mind.

The last time I went to visit with Ajaan Suwat before he passed away, he commented that his brain was sending him all sorts of weird messages, and he'd learned that he had to put a question mark after everything that came into his mind. "But," he said, "that *thing* I gained from the practice: That hasn't gone away." That *thing* was what enabled him to pull out of those messages in order to see that they were strange, weird messages, and that he didn't have to believe

them. He had a foundation, so even as the brain was churning out weird perceptions, he had access to a dimension where he didn't have to get involved.

As we meditate, we're working in the direction of that dimension. The first step is to establish a safe place through concentration to keep our awareness based, a place where it's protected. And that's worth all kinds of effort, all kinds of discouragement, all the things we have to go through in order to get there, because the real sense of solidity and safety that comes with that is more than you can imagine. You realize how long you've been wandering around, misled by your thoughts, and how totally deluded you were, and how much suffering it caused. Then when you can step out—*really* step out, even out of that base of concentration—an enormous burden is lifted. In its place you gain both a sense of the solidity of that new dimension, and the confidence that nothing can touch it because it's outside of space and time. As for what's going to happen inside of space and time, that's a matter of karma. Even awakened people have to age, grow ill, and die, but they've found the dimension that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die.

And how did they find it? By doing what we're doing right now. Every time a thought comes up, here's your chance: Are you going to fall for the thought or are you going to step back from it? The thoughts may be crazy, they may be things you don't want to think about, but as long as you're able to step back from them, you're in a good position. This place where you're stepping back may not be as totally solid as you'd like it, but it's heading you in the right direction. If you don't have this, you have no safety at all. There's no protection, no perspective, at all. Without the perspective there's no wisdom, no insight. And without insight, you're totally immersed in delusion.

What is it like to be totally deluded? You're totally unsure of things. Deep down inside, things don't seem quite right, and there's always an element of fear. As the Buddha said, "As long as you're uncertain about the true Dhamma, there's always the fear of death." What's going to happen when you die? The only way you can know is by looking at the processes of the mind, because it's already going through death and birth on a small level all the time. It just keeps coming back, coming back, coming back. Whatever habitual patterns you've been encouraging in the mind, they just keep coming back again and again and again. But the fortunate thing is that you can step out of them.

This is what the Buddha's teachings on karma are all about. Not everything is pre-determined in the mind. With every present moment, there's always the opportunity to make a new decision, to make a new choice, but most of us abandon that freedom and just keep flowing along with the same old patterns over and over and over again. We need to learn to appreciate our ability to step back and get some perspective, to pull ourselves out of our thought worlds. No

matter how fleeting your stepping out may seem as you're practicing, each time you do it you're strengthening the skillful habit in the mind, the habit that's actually your path.

Ajaan Maha Boowa tells of how when Ajaan Mun passed away, he was really hit with a sense of despair: What was he going to do with his life now? When issues came up in his meditation, to whom would he go for help? He said he felt like someone who'd been depending on a doctor for long years and now the doctor was gone. It was like being a wild animal in the forest with no doctor at all. But then he remembered all the teachings he'd gotten from Ajaan Mun in the past. Those would have to be his teachers now. And what was the point that Ajaan Mun emphasized more than anything else? "Whenever anything comes up in your mind that you're not sure about, just step back and stay with that sense of the knower, that sense of just basic awareness, and no matter what, whatever it is in the mind will pass and you'll be safe." It seems like such a little thing, just the sense of the watcher, the observer, but it can keep you safe, because it's the faculty of the mind that can pull you out.

Even when storms are blowing through the mind, you're in a safe spot. You've got your haven right here. Just don't let yourself get pulled into the storms, because they can blow you all over the place. The Buddha once said, "Look at the animal world. See how variegated it is—all those many, many, many kinds of animals, all the different shapes they take, all the different ways they live." Then he added, "The mind is more variegated than that." It can get itself into all kinds of fixes. But you've also got your protection right here. It's right close to hand. It's closer than your eyes. The point in meditation is to learn how to appreciate it, how to value it. Even though it may seem unstable right now, keep coming back, coming back, coming back. If you don't, what lies in store? You get blown around in the whirlwind, like the shades in Dante's *Inferno*. If you *do* step back, though, you find that you're strengthening a very important habit. Each time you remember to come back builds a pathway in the mind.

When you come to meditate in a place like this, it's as if you've got your nose above water, you've pulled yourself out a little bit from the flood. That's what they call it—"the flood": all these things that come pouring out of the mind. If you're not careful, they can totally immerse you. You can drown. But here you've got your nose above water. You can breathe. It may not yet be the most stable position, but the Buddha says that it can become your island.

You've got your island in the midst of the flood here. It may not be a big island, but it's big enough. As you develop it, it opens up to even better things in the mind.

Without this sense of awareness, what would you have? Nothing. Nothing to hold onto at all. You'd be swept around in the storms that the mind cooks up.

With this, though, you have hope—and it's not a far-off hope. It's something right here. If you learn how to value it, it'll open up and show you all it has to offer—more than you can imagine. It's like one of those fairy tales where there's the ugly little troll under the bridge who, as it turns out, has gold stashed away. The valuable things in life are often in the places where you'd least expect to find them, and they're closer to home than you might think.

So keep this in mind. You've got *gold* right here, but it's covered up by dust and dirt, and the dust and the dirt can be cleared away. Aside from this gold, you have nothing. With the gold you have no more needs.

Taking a Stance

February 20, 2005

Try to gather your awareness around the breath. Make the breath your center, a center from which you can act, speak, and have a sense of a good foundation.

In Pali, the word for the object of the mind, *arammana*, literally means a “support” for the mind. When you meditate, you want to find a good, solid support, because when your support is solid you can deal with whatever’s coming at you from whatever direction, whether thoughts inside the mind or things people do or say from outside. Your response—if it comes from a solid foundation—is coming from a position of strength. When you come from a position of strength, the things you do, say, and think are well thought out. They aren’t desperate, aren’t grasping. If your center is based on things outside—if you’re really concerned about what this or that person thinks about you—you’re putting yourself in a very weak, uncertain position. Your foundation isn’t solid. When it isn’t solid, the things you do aren’t well based.

When I first went to Thailand I taught at Chiang Mai University. One of the things I learned in my spare time there was Thai boxing. When you’re first taught Thai boxing, all the emphasis is on your stance—the stance from which you’re going to hit or kick your opponent. If the stance is solid, you’re coming from a position of strength. This may sound a little aggressive, but it’s an important point to remember as you go throughout life. When you’re dealing with other people, when you’re dealing with all the issues in your mind, you want to come from a good, solid position so you can deal with these things effectively.

The breath is always here. When you’re at ease with your breath, when you feel comfortable with your breath, you’ve got a good foundation. That’s where you can take your stance. Then when you respond to things, you’re coming from a solid position. Your response is more precise, more on target. So try to practice keep coming back to the breath, back to the breath because this is a foundation you’ve got to build.

It may seem artificial at first, but as you get more and more used to it, you find that it really does provide a sense of being at home. One of the Pali terms for a concentrated mind, “*vihara dhamma*,” means just that: a home for the mind, a place where you feel safe, where you feel solidly protected, not only from things outside but also from all the issues that come bubbling up from inside as well.

Because the biggest problems in life are not the events from outside, but in how you react to them.

Even before events come at you from outside, things come bubbling up from within the mind. Sometimes anger comes up in the mind and then you go looking for something to be angry about. It's not in response to anything outside; it's simply an urge coming up in the mind. Then you go out to focus on something outside that you decide you don't like, and the anger builds on that. The same with lust, with fear and anxiety: Sometimes the feeling comes bubbling up and then you look for an object for it to focus on.

So it's not the case that all problems come from outside. Actually, most of them come from within, but the fortunate thing is that not everything inside is problematic. You've got good qualities in here as well, so you want to give them a place to gather so they can pool their strength. That's why you need this foundation. When you're staying with the breath, you've got mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. You keep reminding yourself, "Stay right here with the breath." And then there's alertness: You watch the breath as it comes in, goes out; you know what's happening. It's right there. Whether it's comfortable or not, you know.

If it's not comfortable, you can change it. This is called evaluation. The basic indicator is, "Does the breath feel good or not?" For the Buddha, the big issue in life is suffering, so we start with a minor version of it—a minor sense of discomfort coming from the breath. Why breathe in a way that's uncomfortable? Nobody's forcing you. It's your own lack of attention that allows the breath to get uncomfortable. So pay attention and then learn to work with the breath. See what kind of rhythm feels good, because when the breath goes well it gives you strength, a sense of wellbeing, a sense of being nourished, around which all your other good qualities of mind can gather. When they can gather together, they strengthen one another.

So even though staying focused on the breath may require time and effort, it's an important skill, for once you have this center it's here not only when you sit with your eyes closed. Wherever you go, there's the breath. When you learn to relate to the breath in a good way, you have a good relation going on inside. In other words, you learn to treat the breath with goodwill: You want the breath to be comfortable. When you find that it's not comfortable, you work to help it: That's compassion. When it *is* going well, you help to maintain it: That's appreciation. And when it gets to the point where it's as good as you can get it, you can't get it any better than that, you say, "For the time being, this is as good as it's going to get; let's sit down and just be right here": That's equanimity.

If you learn to relate to your own breath in these ways, it becomes a lot easier to relate to events and people outside with the same qualities. If there's a turmoil

inside, then the turmoil tends to affect your relationships with other people. The way you relate to yourself inside forms the pattern, the template, for how you relate to people outside. So you want to establish a good relation in here, a good family relationship with all these good qualities: mindfulness, alertness, your discernment in telling what's comfortable and what's not, your ingenuity in figuring out ways to make things more comfortable. And the qualities of goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity—they play a role here as well.

When you learn to relate to the breath with these qualities of mind, then every time you get in touch with the breath, the qualities can be there as well. They nurture and inform the way you're going to react to whatever comes up, wherever you are. Whether it's at work or at home, or between work and home, whether you're alone, whether you're with other people—when you've got this good relationship going on inside, when you feel at home with all these good qualities in the mind, then you can tap into them whenever you want.

So this ability to find a center, to establish a foundation in the mind, is one of the basic skills we need to be happy, to be friends with ourselves. The chant just now on true friends and false friends doesn't refer just to people outside. It also refers to qualities of mind. Some qualities in the mind—like greed, anger, and delusion—are false friends. They come promising all kinds of things, and then they don't deliver. They run off to desert you, leaving you worse off than before. Those are your false friends inside. The true friends are the ones who are really helpful, like the good qualities we're trying to gather around the breath here. So, you "attend to them earnestly," as the chant says. Try to keep these qualities informing the way you relate to the breath, and that becomes the foundation from which you relate to things in all your activities.

We have a whole hour to work at this skill, a skill that you don't leave here when the hour is up, but that you take with you. It becomes the basic pattern for how you relate to the body, how the mind relates to itself. It cuts through a lot of the unnecessary stress and frustration, unnecessary turmoil in the mind. So look at this hour as an opportunity to provide yourself with a center. And then after the hour is over, take the center with you wherever you go, because it's always here.

The breath is the point where the mind and the body meet, and as long as you're alive you'll have this breath right here. If you can learn to be at home right here, you're going to have a home wherever you go. As a result, wherever you go will be your own space.

A large part of our life is spent in feeling that somehow other people have taken possession of our space, and we need to depend on their approval so that we can occupy their space. But that's not the case here. This is your space. When

you're happy and comfortable inhabiting your space, you're coming from a position of strength and wellbeing at all times.

Social Anxiety

September 10, 2005

In one of Ajaan Lee's last Dhamma talks he compared life to taking a boat across an ocean. The problem out on the ocean is that there's no fresh water. For most of us meditation is like stopping in a port, picking up some fresh water, and putting it in the boat. Then we go out to sea and discover that we've run out of water, so we have to go back to port. As a result we don't get very far. If we're not careful, the winds will blow us away from the coast, and we'll find ourselves without any water at all.

In other words, when we meditate we pick up a good sense of ease, a sense of inner refreshment. It's like stocking up on water. But then we take it out and we pour the water out our eyes and ears, all over the place. So we have to come back, meditate some more, get some more water—back and forth like this. We never really stock up on enough water to take us across the ocean. So an important lesson we have to learn is how not to pour the water out. What this means is learning how to maintain your center with the breath, inside the body, even when you go outside and deal with other people. This is one of the big issues in any meditator's life.

Ajaan Lee has another passage where he compares the meditation to making the mind one and then turning it into zero. Now, when you have zeros, there are two things you can do with them. You can put them in front of numbers—in which case they have no meaning at all, you don't read them, they don't count—or else you put them after other numbers, in which case 1 turns into 10, and then 100, then 1,000, and then 10,000. If the zeros get put after, you've got lots of issues, but if the zeros get put first, no matter how many zeros you have, they don't add anything, don't burden the mind at all.

It's the same way with the mind: You make it zero and then you put the zeros first. Then when you deal with other people, what they say doesn't count. It's interesting that Ajaan Lee focuses on what other people say as one of the tests for a mind that's really at peace. The Buddha makes a similar point in one of the *Dhammapada* verses. "If, when other people say harsh things to you and you don't reverberate—like a cracked gong—that's a sign that you've attained true peace of mind." This might seem strange. Why does the test lie in how you react to what other people say?

The mind is very sensitive to this issue. We learn very early in our lives that our happiness is going to depend on how other people treat us. As children,

we're surrounded by people a lot more powerful than we are, so there's always a sense of fear built into our relationships to the people around us. We become sensitive to other people's moods, sensitive to what they might do, what they might say. As a result, our center of gravity is placed outside because we're afraid of them, and we try to put up a wall outside ourselves to protect ourselves from them.

What this means is that our psychic center of gravity gets moved outside the body. If you've ever taken any martial arts classes, you know that if your center of gravity is outside your body you're in bad shape. You're in a weak position.

Now the Buddha doesn't say to ignore other people and just be very selfish. He says there's a different way to approach the whole issue of happiness. In other words, you find a source for happiness that doesn't take anything away from anyone else, so you don't have to be afraid of other people. When you're not afraid of them, you find that you can actually be more compassionate to them. So developing and maintaining this center inside is not a selfish thing. The Buddha's not teaching you to be insensitive. He's just saying to put yourself in a stronger position and to trust that you're stronger by not trying to go outside and fix up people's moods and all the other things that we think we can do with other people when we're dealing with them. Just stay inside and have a sense of confidence that you're strong inside. After all, your source of happiness lies inside. Because it's not taking anything away from anybody else, you don't have to be afraid of them.

Especially when you can get your awareness to fill the whole body, when you get the breath flowing smoothly throughout the whole body: This smooth flow of energy builds up a kind of force field. An image in the Canon is that the meditator who's able to fill the body with awareness is like a door made out of solid wood. If you were to take a ball of string and throw it at the door, it wouldn't make any dent in the door at all. The mind filled with awareness, with the breath energy flowing smoothly, is the same sort of thing. It's solid. It resists outside influences.

But when your awareness *doesn't* fill the body like this, the Buddha says it's like a ball of wet clay into which somebody throws a stone. The stone makes a big dent in the clay. In other words, you're in a weak position, and you intuitively know you're in a weak position. Other people can invade your inner space. So you scramble around and try to build up all sorts of defenses. Because so much energy gets spent in the defenses, and the energy is outside the body, it knocks you off balance. You use up the water of your meditation, the refreshment of your meditation, very quickly this way.

The trick, as Ajaan Lee says, is to have a little distillery in the boat so that you can take the salt water and put it into the distillery, to turn it into fresh water.

Then everywhere you go you've got fresh water. In other words, no matter where you go, you're right *here*: centered in the body, with your awareness filling the body. You're not leaving the body unprotected and you're not using up all your energy in those false outside defenses. You're creating a sense of energy here in the body, a sense of refreshment, and it's protecting you as well. This way you can travel around the world because there's salt water everywhere. If you've got the skill, you can turn it into fresh water—as much fresh water as you want.

So as you leave meditation, it's important that you watch to see: How does the mind move? How does it go flowing out your eyes and ears into the space outside your body? If you catch it and bring it back in, how is it going to complain? There's going to be a sense of fear, or a sense of uncertainty about trying to stay inside. In the beginning you may feel unprotected. *Don't listen to those voices*. Those are voices that took over your mind when you were a little child and didn't know anything. That was the best you could do at that time, but now you've got more skills, better skills, more understanding.

Learn how to reason with those voices: "Here's a good solid place, a good safe place, a secure place to be—right here inside the body—and you're operating from a position of strength." And just that much is not only a gift to yourself, but also the people around you. They'll sense the difference as well, and it makes your interaction with them a lot easier.

So learn to have some trust for this sense of being inside the body. The awareness that fills the body, the breath energy that fills the body, can protect you in a lot of ways. It can provide the nourishment and the refreshment you need at all times. At the same time, it develops a momentum in the practice. If you keep on creating all the water you need, when you have more than enough, you can share it with the people around you. Your sense of what it means to interact with people will change—will be a lot less fearful—and your sense of what it means to be refreshed will grow deeper and stronger.

The Mind's Song

May, 2003

Ajaan Lee used to say that there are two steps to getting started in the meditation. One is to get your body into position: right leg on top of the left leg, or left on top of the right, depending on what you find more comfortable; your back straight; facing forward; your eyes closed; your hands in your lap.

The next step is to get your mind in position. And that's more difficult because the mind doesn't usually want to stay in any one particular position. It's always running around, always quick like a high-strung cat to jump at anything that comes along. Ajaan Mun once talked about "the mind's song." There are rhythms that go through the body, rhythms that seem to go through our awareness. And we start singing along with them without really realizing it, and then we're off wherever the melody will take us. When we put the mind in position, we stop singing along. We just watch what's going on.

So you bring it to the breath. It's a good way to get out of your head and down into the body. Give yourself a good comfortable place to stay and be aware of the breath coming in, aware of the breath going out. Notice how the breathing feels in different parts of the body, because the breathing is a whole-body process. If it's not a whole-body process, that's a sign that there's a blockage someplace you've got to work with.

But first get a good breath rhythm going in any one spot where it's easy to watch. It might be at the nose, the chest, the abdomen, the neck, the middle of the head—any place where all the different pressures of the breath coming in and going out and the pressures of your blood circulation feel right together. Focus right there and allow the breath to find whatever rhythm feels good, feels gratifying. If the mind wanders off, bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. You're trying to put it in position—which means finding a good, comfortable posture for the mind—and then trying to get it to *stay* in position. It's the staying that makes all the difference. If you just get into position and then quickly jump away, you don't get the benefits of being in position.

And there are lots of benefits. One, you're giving the mind a place to rest, so that it can recover its strength from all that running around. And, two, when it's in position it can watch, because if you ever want to watch something carefully *you* have to be very still. If you're running around all the time everything is a blur. You snatch a little sight of something here, snatch a sight of something

there, but you don't see anything continuously — which means you don't really understand it.

So we're trying to put the mind in a position where it can stay and watch continuously. This position of the observer is a very important part of the meditation — the observer that doesn't go singing along with the different rhythms or thoughts coming through the mind, but watches them as events. When you're watching things as events, you can decide which things are worth following through with and which ones are not. Of course, you sometimes find yourself slipping off into your old habits of singing along, but you can catch yourself, stop, and come back to the breath, come back to this position of the observer.

Get more and more used to being here. This is where the mind can have a sense of being at home, where it can rest, where it can accurately watch the movements of the mind. Where are they running to? Are they going to a place you want to go? If not, you just drop them, and whatever reality they seemed to have will dissolve away. It's because you give them a reality that they become solid and imposing and gain power over you. But if you learn simply to watch them as events, you can gain the upper hand.

So what you're doing here is developing a place for the mind to rest — a place where, in resting, it heals itself. At the same time, it can watch. And in the watching it learns not to build up new diseases. As any doctor can tell you, there are two parts to maintaining good health. One is taking the medicine when you need it, and the other is having a healthy lifestyle. If you want to be healthy, it's not good to eat unhealthy food, go around smoking, eating junk food, and then coming to the doctor to ask for medicine. The medicine will help, but not nearly as much as when you have a healthy lifestyle where you're not putting the junk into your system to begin with.

And the same holds true for the mind. We come here to meditate to help heal the mind from all the damage it does to itself. We tend to think more of the stress coming in from outside, but actually *we're* playing along with the outside stress, we're singing along with the outside stress, which is why it gets into the mind.

So we come here, close our eyes, sit in a still position, and give the mind a chance to wash out all the unhealthy energies it's picked up. This is a good thing to be doing, but it would be even better if we could maintain this position of the observer all the time. That's a healthy lifestyle for the mind. This is what you want to try to do as the mind gets accustomed to settling down with the breath. Not only when you're sitting here, but also when you get up and start moving around: Try to maintain this same inner position, this same inner posture of being the observer.

And try to notice when you lose it. That's a sign you've run across something important: one of those tricks the mind plays on itself to go someplace it knows it shouldn't. That's one of the reasons for these lapses. The other is that it simply forgets itself and just starts singing along with whatever thought comes along, whatever mood comes along.

These things seem to have so much reality simply because we sing along with them. But if you can maintain the position of the observer, you watch these things as they come, and you begin to see the damage they can do if you take them in. You realize that you have the choice. You don't have to play along with them, you don't have to sing along with them, you don't have to take them in. You're now in a position of strength, a position where you can watch, where you can see these things simply as events rather than as the worlds to enter into.

In this way you find that the medicine of sitting meditation can seep deeper and deeper, and show more effects than you might have imagined before. Up to now it's simply been a holding action. When things are bad, you sit down; you wash things out of your system, you feel better, and then you go back to your old habits. As a result, the meditation doesn't get a chance to penetrate deeply, to show itself as anything more than simple stress reduction or momentary relief from all the suffering you're carrying around.

But when you can maintain the position of the observer, it becomes a lifestyle, a way of living in which you're not bringing in all those other things to burden the mind to begin with. No matter how the body moves, no matter how thoughts move, you maintain this position. If you can keep this up, then when you come to sit and meditate, you find the meditation goes deeper, deeper, and deeper. You see that it can do more than you might have imagined. It can address the more subtle diseases in the mind, the more subtle harm the mind is doing to itself.

It's like maintaining a yoga position or a stretch. The first couple of seconds are hard because you feel stiff, but then you relax into the stretch. As you relax, you can go further into the stretch because you give it more time, more continuous time, to work its effects.

Meditation is not here simply for coping with the stresses and strains of life. It's for showing how we can ultimately go beyond causing any suffering or stress for ourselves at all—not only for ourselves, but also for the people around us. Ultimately, we learn to drop even the position of the observer to open up to a different dimension in the mind that lies outside of time, outside of space, outside of all the worlds we can create for ourselves.

But to see that you first have to make the observer strong. And to do that you have to give the meditation time, and you have to make it part of a lifestyle, a way of living—an inner posture, an inner position that you maintain—this

observer who watches the moods come and go, watches the thoughts come and go, doesn't sing along with them, doesn't cause itself the damage it used to. Over time you find that the posture of the observer goes deeper and deeper. The observer can see more and more because you give it the time to develop, to become strong, to become your real home where you settle down.

So ideally, ultimately, when you meditate, it won't be a matter of getting in position. You'll get the body in position, but the mind will already be in position, the habitual position of the observer. Instead of running out after things, singing along with this tune, singing along with that, you're stepping back a bit. You have a place to step back and simply watch these things. If there's any use to them, you follow through with them. If not, you let them go. This becomes the basic stance of the mind.

As I said, when you reach that point, the meditation shows that it can do a lot more than you might have imagined. It can solve problems you didn't even know you had, eliminate levels of suffering and stress you didn't even know you were causing, because they were always there in the background.

Now that the mind is even more subtle and still, it can see these things. And it's only when you see things that you can let them go.

Intelligent Equanimity

September, 2001

Every evening before we meditate, we chant the four sublime attitudes: goodwill—“May all living beings be happy”; compassion—“May they all be free from stress and pain”; appreciation—“May they not lose the happiness they’ve found.”

And then there’s equanimity. Instead of saying, “All living beings can just go to hell, I don’t care,” the chant says, “All living beings are the owners of their actions, heirs to their actions.”

Exactly how is that thought related to equanimity? Notice that it comes last in the list. In other words, you first cultivate goodwill, compassion, and appreciation. But then there comes a point where you realize that you can have goodwill for people but they’re not happy. You can have compassion for them and they still don’t get released from their suffering. You can have appreciation for their happiness, but they abuse it. They abuse their power, they abuse their wealth. You begin to realize that there’s only so much you can do, not only for other people but also for yourself.

That’s where the reflection on karma comes in. You realize that certain things are caused by past karma and there’s no way you can change them. Other people’s karma places limitations on them; your own karma places limitations on you. You have to live realistically within those limitations. You can push them a bit, you can push the envelope to see how much you can work for your own happiness and for that of others, but there comes a point where the envelope pushes back. You realize that you can only do so much at any given time. You can do only so much with the energy, the talents you have. So the appropriate response is to put aside the areas where you can’t help or can’t make a difference, so that you can focus on the areas where you can.

That’s what the chant on karma is all about: to give you a sense of priorities, to remind yourself of what’s important. You’ve got a limited amount of energy, a limited amount of time in this life. You help where you can, but if you can’t help there’s no point in getting upset, no point in suffering over it. There’s no point in expending your energies in areas where you just can’t make a difference, for you only have so much. Equanimity means making peace with the principle of karma so that you can work within it and use your energy wisely. That’s part of what it means to say, “Whatever you do for good or for evil, to that will you fall heir.”

You have to accept the principle of karma if you're going to be skillful in using what you've got.

The teaching on equanimity is not counseling cold indifference. It's simply reminding you of where your priorities are, where your limitations are, and that you've got to work within those limitations. In other words, if an issue comes from your past karma, you realize you can't change that. What you can change, what you can shape is what you're doing right now. So focus there.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about the skillful and unskillful ways of teaching karma and of thinking about karma. An unskillful way is to say that everybody who does evil is going to go to hell; everybody who does something bad is going to suffer. You look back and you realize that you, like everyone else, have done some bad things in your life: the times when you acted on less than noble or less than your best intentions. If you simply brood over your big mistakes, you put yourself into a spiral that goes down, down, down. It doesn't help you at all. What you should do is to remind yourself that even though there's past karma, there's also new karma, a fresh slate. You can choose freely right now to act as skillfully as possible. Whatever you've done in the past that was unskillful, just put it aside. Make up your mind that you're not going to make that same mistake again. And then move on. It's not that you deny your mistakes. You freely admit them. It's not that you're blasé about them. You realize that a mistake's a mistake and you don't want to repeat it. But if you simply brood on the mistakes you made in the past, you don't leave yourself the energy needed to act skillfully in the present moment.

It's a matter of priorities: Where are you going to focus your energies to get the best results? The reflection connecting the principle of karma with equanimity is meant to clear the decks so that you can focus right there, on your present actions. That's where the true issue is. That's what underlies the basic structure of reality. When you can focus here, you don't get all caught up in all the "what ifs" about the past: "What if I had done this? What if I hadn't done that?" All those "what ifs" about the past are a massive waste of time. The important "what if" is: "What if I act skillfully now?" Try that out.

Buddhism doesn't teach heartlessness. It starts out with goodwill. Look at the path: It's a way of working for your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around you, a way of putting an end to suffering. That's goodwill put into action in spades. The teaching on equanimity is meant to make sure that your goodwill doesn't run off the road, doesn't burn out, doesn't waste time getting lost in unskillful byways.

In other words, the Buddha doesn't tell you to be indifferent about your choices in the present moment, or to say, "Who cares what I do in the present moment?" You can't think that way. You have to let goodwill, compassion, and

appreciation dominate your choice of how you're going to act right now — and right now and right now, as the present keeps moving through time. You can't be indifferent to that. There has to be a strong sense of desire, purpose, and resolve about doing the most skillful thing you can, each moment you're aware of your choices. You have to make yourself more and more aware of exactly what choices you're making. That requires effort and energy.

The development of equanimity husbands your resources so that you can focus them on the spot where they're most useful, where they really will make a difference. You develop equanimity about the path only when you've obtained the goal. Even the equanimity you feel when you've obtained the goal: There's a transcending of that as well, in what the texts call "non-fashioning." In other words, you realize that equanimity is a choice you make: These are the things you're going to put aside; these are the things you're going to focus on. The things you put aside, you really do have to let yourself not get worked up about them. When the path is finally completed, that's the point when it, too, comes into the realm of equanimity. You can let go of it. Don't fashion anything at all, not even the choices of equanimity. That's when the mind gains release.

So you develop universal equanimity in accepting the principle of karma, but in applying it to your past and present choices you need a selective equanimity up until the endpoint of the path. That way, instead of being a blanket indifference to everything — which would be like being a dead person — equanimity becomes an important tool in keeping you alive and active, making sure all the energy and activity you've got to devote to the present moment is used in the best possible way. Otherwise you drag yourself down by taking on too many responsibilities, too many cares. When that happens, nothing much gets accomplished at all. Only when you focus your energies properly can they really pay off.

As you develop your meditation, try to bring the mind to concentration so that it can maintain this state of equanimity from which you continue your work. In other words, you have equanimity for everything else at that point, aside from the development of insight. Then the equanimity serves to protect you as well. Ajaan Fuang once said, "If you don't have the equanimity of jhana, goodwill will cause you suffering," because you see how limited your ability to help other people is. You keep running up against the limitations created by your own past karma in exactly how much you can accomplish for them at any one time. You also run up against the limitations of their past and present karma. If you develop the proper equanimity to those limitations, you don't have to suffer because of them. You simply recognize them and work around them, on the areas that *are* open to you. Equanimity is an important way of nourishing you on

the path, giving you strength, making sure that your basic goodwill for yourself and other people gets properly directed and not squandered.

Don't think of equanimity as a heartless or cold state of mind. It's simply a very realistic way of looking at things. Notice that in the Four Sublime Attitudes, the other three are, "*May* all living beings be this way, *May* all living beings be that way." But when you get to the fourth one, the thought is, "All living beings *are* the owners of their actions." There's no *may* in there, it's just a statement of fact. You recognize reality, you recognize the limitations in this causal realm in which we operate, and you make up your mind to work within those limitations in as creative and effective way as is possible.

Someone once wrote a book on Buddhism called *The Intelligent Heart*. This is precisely what these four attitudes try to develop: an intelligent heart, an intelligence in the way your heart, your will, and your motivation function in your life so as to get the most out of them. And equanimity is what makes the intelligence possible.

Intelligent Design

September 30, 2005

One of the major ironies of how Buddhism has come to the West is how the teaching on dependent co-arising has been turned into a teaching on interdependence or interconnectedness. With the original teaching, the emphasis was on how things work together to cause suffering, whereas the new teaching is something to celebrate. It's good that everything works together, everything fits together. We're all interdependent, we're all interconnected, and it's a lovely, comforting thing. But when you look carefully at the way things are actually interconnected, it's hard to see much to celebrate. The fit is always a little loose, a little awkward, and this causes a lot of pain and suffering. Extra water vapor coming off the Atlantic has now killed people in New Orleans and driven up oil prices all over the United States. It's a weird string of connections.

Or you don't have to look that far afield. Just look at your own body, at how things are connected in the body. See how the human body is constructed. The back: As you grow older you begin to realize how poorly designed the human back is. If there *is* a designer, it's not a very intelligent design, or if there is an intelligence behind it, it's a malicious intelligence. It's designed for pain; it's designed to fall apart.

Or look at how human beings are born. You start with sex, which requires a lot of lust, but then lust—whoever designed lust, if there was a designer, was pretty malicious because lust isn't something you can control. You start lusting after the wrong people, which is what most people seem to do most of the time. And lust doesn't only create babies. It also leads to deception, to murder, to disease, to all kinds of problems, and yet it's an essential part of the mix to keep the human race going.

And then there's pregnancy: all the pains a woman goes through in bearing a child. In Thailand, before each ordination, they traditionally have an afternoon-long chant. A layperson is hired to chant to remind the young monk candidate of all the suffering his mother went through in raising him. If the chant lasts for about four hours, three of those hours are focused on the nine months of pregnancy—the months of morning sickness, the months of something kicking in her stomach. And then there's birth. They say that the most extreme pain that a human being can endure is the pain of giving birth. And it's no fun for the child, either. If there is a design behind all this, if there is an intelligent design, it's a malicious intelligence.

So this is the world that we're born into. This is how we're born. And it required a Buddha to approach the world with some compassionate intelligence, seeing all this interconnectedness and saying there is a way we can use these interconnected things, these dependent things, to find a way out of the suffering. That's what he gave his life to: both the finding and the teaching.

And it's a very fragile teaching. If you look at Buddhist history, you see that wherever the Dhamma goes, people find all kinds of ways of trying to divert the teaching to other purposes, forgetting that its original purpose was the most compassionate: showing the way out of suffering. Our imagination is so tied up with the normal way of using connectedness or interdependence that it really has trouble negotiating that compassionate use.

This is why the path is so hard: It goes against the grain. If anything calls into question the idea of an intelligent designer or a compassionate designer, it's the fact that the quest for the end to suffering, the quest for a true and lasting happiness, goes so much against the grain of the human mind. Keep that in mind as you practice. It's to be expected that the practice is going to go against the grain. And because the path requires working with tools that normally fit into another purpose—the survival of the body—it's very easy for us to get off track. You have to keep in mind the fact that deep down inside your deepest desire is a desire for happiness, a happiness that's not going to change on you, a happiness that's not going to leave you in the lurch, a happiness that doesn't have to involve other suffering.

That was the desire the Buddha respected within himself, and he respected it within other people as well. That's why he searched for this path. When he found it, that's why he taught it—to speak to that specific desire. And yet there's so much in the world that tells us that it's unrealistic, it's too much trouble. All those voices are ready to pounce on any problems that come up in the practice. But keep that little fire burning inside: that if there's any sense to this life at all, it lies in finding a true happiness. Always try to protect that. Do what you can to maintain it, use your intelligence to sidestep any discouragements that might put it out.

After all, this path is made out of conditioned things, so there are times when it seems like everything comes crashing down and you have to put it together all over again. But it can always be put together again. Whether it's going to snuff out that little flame is really up to you. The trick to surviving the bad periods in the path is to keep that long vision in mind and to remember the nature of this path: It's a constructed path, a fabricated path. It leads to something unfabricated, but the path itself is a fabrication, which means that it's dependent on conditions. Sometimes the conditions aren't all they could be, but we do have

this intelligence within us that can learn how to make the best of difficult things, makeshift things, to hammer things together in a new way.

So do what you can to strengthen your intelligence on the path. This is a strength composed of five things. First, there's the conviction that there's got to be a way out of suffering. Second, there's persistence, sticking with that conviction, acting on it all the time. Third, there's mindfulness: You remember to keep that conviction in mind all the time and to apply it to all of your actions. Fourth and fifth are concentration and discernment. The discernment there is to help find ways over the obstacles that we all inevitably find on the path, and the concentration is to give your mind the food it needs to keep its energy up.

The texts talk about persistence as a requisite for concentration, but the relationship goes the other way as well. Do your best just to stick with one object. When everything else seems to be crazy in life, just say, "Okay, I'm going to stay right here. If I don't know anything else for sure, what I do know for sure is that the breath is now coming in, the breath is now going out. Let's just hang out here for the time being." In that way you can weather whatever crisis comes up, and it gives you the strength to deal with things, to recover.

I was reading recently about studies they've done of major disasters and catastrophes—huge hurricanes, earthquakes, fires. They've noticed how people immediately after a catastrophe feel a bizarre sense of euphoria. They develop a sense of common purpose as they drop their normal concerns and band together to rebuild, to recover. Then, after a while, once things get back to normal again, everybody goes back to their old ways. As one researcher pointed out, right after a catastrophe there's a suspension of time; people's normal narratives stop functioning and there's a sense of liberation from those narratives as you've now got an obvious, immediate, common purpose. In fact, one of the researchers said it sounded a lot like Buddhist meditation to him: the idea of dropping the narrative of the past and the future and just staying with the present moment, finding a purpose in the present moment. That gave a buoyancy to the rebuilding efforts.

Well, try to use that same attitude when your meditation comes crashing down. You've got some rebuilding work to do. It gives you a purpose and it's something you can focus on totally in the present moment. The best way of doing that is to drop the whole narrative that's driving you crazy: the fact that things seemed to be going well and now all of a sudden they've crashed. Whether it's a sudden crash or a gradual one doesn't really matter. What matters is that you realize, "Okay, just forget about the narrative and focus on the needs of the present moment." That's all you're responsible for. That's all you have to worry about. You'll find that that will give you the buoyancy, the energy you need in order to start the rebuilding work.

So, again, what you're using here is the process of dependent co-arising, the interconnectedness of conditioned phenomena, but you're pointing it in a new direction. In one of the suttas the Buddha describes what one modern teacher has called transcendent dependent co-arising. It's the typical pattern, starting with ignorance and going through craving and ending up in suffering. And the normal reaction to suffering, as the Buddha once said, is a combination of bewilderment and search. We're bewildered about why this particular type of suffering is happening and we search, hoping that somebody else will know a way out. What usually happens is that the bewilderment simply adds more ignorance. The search turns into more craving, and that leads to more suffering.

But there are times when the search turns into a solid conviction: There must be a way out. And you're going to do whatever is needed to find that way out. You've reflected on life and seen that the design, if there is a design, is not compassionate at all. All you have to see is someone go through the process of aging, illness, and death, and you realize—if there is a design—how harsh it is. But more likely this is just the way things happen to be, without any overarching point or purpose. As you realize that, you've got to reflect on the fact that there must be a way out. And you've got the Buddha and his Noble Disciples to say, "Yes, there is." We're fortunate that we have their testimony. Their testimony is like a challenge. Are you up for the challenge? If you're not, you're going to have to suffer like everybody else. If you *are* up for the challenge, though, you're still going to suffer for a while, but it will be in a different way. It's a suffering that leads to the end of suffering. So make the most of this opportunity because it's the only intelligent way to find happiness—and it doesn't come along all that often.

The Saints Don't Grieve

January 28, 2005

One of the most difficult but important principles in the practice is what the Buddha called, "Learning to see renunciation as freedom."

For most of us renunciation seems to be a restriction—as when you're getting the mind to focus on the breath. Before you make up your mind to do that, the mind doesn't seem to be restricted, doesn't seem to have any violent wishes, or disorderliness or unruliness. But then all of a sudden, as soon as you tell it to stay with the breath, it finds all sorts of other places where it wants to go. It complains that it's being constricted, that it's being tied down. You have to learn *not* to listen to those complaints, because, as the Buddha explains, when the mind really does settle down with one object, it's freed from a lot of restrictions and burdens.

He describes progress through stages of concentration as stage-by-stage release. Simply getting the mind to stay consistently with the breath, you're released from unskillful mental states, released from sensual desires. That's a state of freedom, but there's a part of the mind that doesn't see it that way. And that part of the mind gets a lot of encouragement from the world outside, partly because it's in other people's interest to have us chained to our sensual desires. Once we're chained to our sensual desires, they have a hook to sell us things, to make us buy, and our desires play along with that.

We mistrust the impulse toward celibacy, toward renunciation. I was talking a while back to a Zen practitioner—admittedly someone who wasn't all that advanced—about conflict resolution in the community, and I pointed out that having the Vinaya as our standard was very liberating. To him that was an unusual idea—that rules could be liberating. Part of his quest, he said, was "to learn how to see beyond rules so that you weren't confined by them. So how could rules be liberating?" I pointed out, "For one thing, we don't have to sit around discussing what the standards of behavior in the community are going to be week after week after week. It's all settled. The standards are livable, they're humane. So having the standards established frees us to have a lot more time to practice."

And that's just a very basic example. There are other ways in which rules are liberating as well. Popular culture likes to hear about monks and nuns who are having trouble with their vows, who end up either disrobing or acting out their desires in weird and convoluted ways. This shows that they're being confined

and restricted by their rules, that they really miss the things that they gave up. That's what popular culture likes to hear—that it's offering us all the really good things in life, and that the alternatives are bogus. But when you really get a taste of what it's like to get the mind to settle down without having to hanker after other things, you find how liberating it is. When you see the rewards, you're more and more willing to let go of the things that you're normally attached to in favor of the freedom of not being attached.

This impulse to mistrust the principle of renunciation isn't just an American or a Western issue. It goes way back in Buddhist history. For example, there's the Mahayana ideal that the arahants are stuck in a limited nirvana. The Mahayanists feel that bodhisattvas have more freedom because they have a foot in both worlds, they say.

Well, nirvana is the opposite of being stuck. For one thing, it's not a place. When there's no place, there's no being stuck anywhere. Second, the person who attains nirvana is totally undefined, with no restrictions whatsoever. From the outside it looks uninviting, but from the actual experience of the practice—of learning to let go, let go, let go and be less and less defined by this, that or the other attachment—it brings a huge sense of freedom.

So, as we stick with our efforts to stay with the breath, to stay with one thing, remember: We're sticking, but we're not stuck. We're not being confined. We're learning to give up restrictions, learning to get out of the chains that have become so familiar that we've learned to mistrust the idea that anybody could be happy outside of those chains. But the freedom beyond those chains is just what the Buddha's talking about. All his teachings aim in that direction. He said that his teachings all have a single taste. Just as the ocean has the taste of salt—anywhere you go in the ocean the water tastes salty—everywhere you look in his teachings there's the taste of freedom, the taste of release.

Even when he teaches restraint of the senses, again, it's for the purpose of liberating the mind from all the unskillful states that would arise if you weren't careful. He says that if you're not careful about how you look at things, how you listen to things, how you smell things, taste things, touch things, then the mind is assailed. It's injured by sense objects. To many people that amount of restraint sounds confining, but when you take the mind to a state of concentration where it's not injured in that way, you realize the sense of freedom, the sense of relief that results.

So a lot of the practice comes down to a willingness to take the Buddha at his word in spite of all of our fear of what it might be like to renounce things, to give things up, to show restraint. Our preconception is that it's very confining, and, as the song goes, "The saints are so miserable they're crying and grieving. I'd rather laugh with the sinners than grieve with the saints."

Well, the sinners don't laugh all that long—and the saints don't grieve:
They're totally free.

So allow space in your imagination for that possibility: that renunciation really is freedom, when you do it wisely, when you do it to learn and understand. Open up your imagination to the possibility that the Buddha was right—that all these practices and rules really do have the taste of freedom.

A Culture of Restraint

April 11, 2005

The Buddha once compared sensory input to being like a flayed cow with no skin. Everywhere the cow goes, insects bore into its flesh all the time. Our senses are constantly picking up information through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body. And on top of that, the mind is its own sense. It picks up all kinds of ideas. The question is, how are you going to find any peace in the midst of all that? And the answer is: You have to be selective.

The Buddha talks about restraint of the senses as an essential part of meditation. We often think of meditation as what starts as soon as you sit down and close your eyes, but actually it's going on all the time. The word for meditation, "*bhavana*," means to develop. You should stop and look: What are you developing in your mind?

When you follow certain trains of thought, you develop the habits that go along with them. You create ruts in the mind. When you give free rein to anger, you create an anger-rut. When you develop mindfulness, you create a mindfulness-rut. The next time you get anywhere near those patterns of thinking, the mind falls into the rut and goes along with it. We're doing this all the time. They've done study after study to show how selective our process of perception is. It happens on many levels. Some of it's conscious, some of it's not, but the upshot is that even before you sit down to close your eyes, you're already in a process of developing.

The question is, is it developing the same thing the meditation is meant to develop? Are you developing calm or are you developing turmoil? Are you developing mental stability or are you developing restlessness? Look into this all the time. Everything you do, everything you say is a process of developing something. It's laying down ruts in the mind, so what kind of ruts do you want? We're trying to work on good ones as we sit here with our eyes closed, but if the rest of the day you're working on other kinds of ruts, it's a struggle.

When you look at things, what are you looking for? Who's doing the looking? Is lust doing the looking? Is anger doing the looking? If these things are doing the looking, they create the ruts for more anger or more lust to keep on doing the looking. So throughout the course of the day, be careful of what you look at.

This doesn't mean you can't look at good-looking things. It's just that when you see something good-looking, you have to remind yourself that there's another side to it as well. When you see something you really hate, remind

yourself that there's another side to it as well. As Ajaan Lee used to say, "Be a person with two eyes." The same applies to your listening, what you smell, what you taste, what you touch, and especially what you think about.

It's a common pattern that when you're sitting here meditating, you try to keep the mind under control but then as soon as you get up, it's back to its old ways—just wandering around anyplace it wants to. And that way you're being inconsistent. If the mind is going to go someplace, you have to ask yourself, "Why are you going there?" It's like that old slogan from World War II: "Is this trip really necessary?" Where are you planning to go? What are you planning to bring back? Be deliberate in your thinking. The Buddha's not saying not to think. He's just saying to have a sense of why you're thinking, what it's going to accomplish. The same holds true with the looking and the listening: Have a sense of why you're looking at something, what you're going to accomplish by looking at it. Why are you listening to certain things?

All of this is part of the meditation, part of the developing, because you're creating the environment in your mind and you want to make sure you're creating the right environment. Get your priorities in order. This way the meditation is less an attempt at a little island of calm in the midst of whirlpools. It's more a part of an ongoing process—realizing that the mind needs to be trained, and that the training is a full time process.

Even when you're out in the world—not just here at the monastery—you've got to look at where your mind is going, what it's picking up. In particular, notice what it's picking up because there are all kinds of bizarre messages out there. As soon as you turn on the TV, pick up a newspaper, pick up a magazine, the question should always be, "Why do these people want me to believe this?"—so that you don't fall for the messages, for the unstated values.

If this makes you a stranger in your surroundings, well, fine. Sometimes it's good to be a stranger, not to pick up everything. One of the advantages of going to Thailand was just that: No matter how much I was absorbed in the culture, in the language, there was still part of me that was an outsider, and that outside perspective was always important. Sometimes it helps you keep your sanity, because that outsider perspective can be your guide inside, your inner teacher.

The Buddha talks about the traditions of the noble ones, or the customs of the noble ones. To practice in line with these traditions is to make you a person with one foot in two different cultures. The noble ones look at material things and say, "Remember all the suffering that goes into just providing food, clothing and shelter, so don't get all wrapped up in having lots of food, lots of clothing, a big house. Remember that those things have their drawbacks." The world out there is saying, "Buy, buy, buy," but the noble ones are saying, "No." Listening to the noble ones helps keep you bicultural. When the media push all kinds of

materialistic values on you, there's a part of you that can say, "No." You're not sucked into those things, and as a result the mind is more independent, has a lot more peace. It can keep its values straight even in crazy societies like ours.

There's a phrase in the *Dhammapada*: the people who see shame in what's not shameful or see no shame in what is shameful. A part of the world looks at the values of being moral, having principles, not fighting tooth and claw to get lots of belongings, and see *that* as shameful, as something to be embarrassed about. That's why you've got to get out of that culture. This is why we need the culture of the noble ones. That voice of restraint inside is going to be your protection. Learn how to listen to it, to strengthen it, so that restraint in day-to-day life augments the restraint of your meditation. You're trying to focus on one thing, and you can stay there because you're used to exercising restraint in a healthy way: knowing how much you can rein the mind in, when you have to give it a little extra leash, so it doesn't feel too confined, too cooped up, but at the same time knowing how much is too much—this is something you have to learn over time.

So think about the environment you're creating in your mind, the environment that allows the mind to settle down, the values that allow it to settle down, so that when disturbing thoughts arise you don't immediately go with them. You can look at them and say, "That's not a thought I want to follow." When you're used to saying No to things already, it's easier to say No to them when you're sitting here with your eyes closed focusing on the breath. And vice versa: When you've got your eyes open you can remind yourself, "I've been able to overcome this thought before. I've been able to say No to it, and I haven't died."

This way you can maintain your mental health, and the meditation really does become an ongoing process of developing—developing the skillful qualities you want: mindfulness, alertness, a sense of calm, a sense of wholeness and wellbeing in body and mind. As the Buddha said, "The mind well trained brings happiness." It needs to be well trained because it's always doing things, so make sure that what it's doing is in line with where you want to go.

Self Esteem

January 4, 2005

Life doesn't teach lessons. It's up to us to learn lessons, which means that we have to take the initiative. We can't wait for the things we need to know to be automatically presented to us as our birthright. Ajaan Fuang stressed this point when I first went back to stay with him. He told me, "You have to think like a thief if you want to learn the Dhamma." In other words, don't expect everything to be handed to you on a platter. It's up to you to be observant. When you're listening to somebody talk, whether they're aiming at teaching you a lesson or not, what can you learn from what they have to say? When events happen in your life, when events happen to people around you, what can you learn?

When you make the willingness to learn the basis for your self esteem, that cuts through a lot of other issues as well. And it's one of the few forms of self esteem that actually keeps you open to change. For many of us, self esteem means thinking that basically we're good people—which means that we have to keep trying to look back on our past actions to see evidence of that. And then, of course, we run across things that *don't* support that idea, and so we block them out of our minds. We don't like to think about them. In many cases those are precisely the things we need to learn from.

So when you detect a tendency not to want to reflect on your past mistakes, try to look into the fear around that: Why are you afraid of looking at these things? Fear in and of itself is not a bad thing. The problem is when fear is conjoined with greed, anger, and delusion. The greed, anger, and delusion are what create the problem. Fear in and of itself can often be skillful. After all, a lot of the Buddha's teachings are based on the very rational fear of the suffering that comes with aging, illness and death. There's the word, "*ottappa*," which means the fear of the consequences of unskillful actions. That's something the Buddha encouraged. He says it's a treasure.

There's also the word, "*samvega*," which is sometimes translated as dismay or shock. It's related to an adjective, "*samvigga*," which means terrified. You look at the way life goes aimlessly on and on and on, and the appropriate reaction is a sense of terror. One thing leads to another, and often nothing seems to lead anywhere worthwhile at all. As the Buddha emphasized, the only way out of this sense of terror or dismay is to develop strong confidence and conviction in the principle of karma, the principle of action. And that requires that you be willing to learn what's skillful, what's not.

So when you see the mind refusing to look at mistakes you've made in the past, you have to ask yourself, "What's being threatened by the idea of looking at those mistakes?" Often you find that it's your sense of self esteem, your sense of, "I'm basically a good person, I wouldn't want to hurt people." You don't want to admit the things you did to hurt yourself, to hurt others. You don't want to look at feelings and emotions that you feel guilty or ashamed of.

But if you're really serious about putting an end to suffering, you need to develop the strength of mind to look into those things, for otherwise the consequences of *not* looking into them are even more fearsome. So it's not an issue of learning not to have fear; it's learning where fear should properly be focused. And where it should be focused is on the idea that if you don't learn from your past mistakes, you're never going to learn. At the very least you're not learning anything right now, and in not learning anything right now you're leaving yourself open to all kinds of mistakes in the future.

So look at the sense of self esteem that wants to say, "I'm already good," that wants a nice pat on the head, and—if nobody else gives one—gives itself a pat on the head. Look at the price of trying to keep that sense of self esteem shored up, of trying to protect it when it's so obviously fragile. If you try to maintain that kind of self esteem, you're setting yourself up for a fall because you can't continue to stay in denial forever. Even while you're in denial, the suffering that comes from your actions just keeps coming back, coming back, coming back.

We see this pattern in other people, and as the Buddha says, "The wise person is someone who learns lessons from other people's actions as well." There's that famous sutta about the four types of horses. The quick, well-trained horse only has to see the shadow of the whip and he does what he knows should be done. Next down, there's the horse has to feel the whip on his coat. Then there's the horse who has to feel the whip cutting into his hide, and finally the horse who has to feel the whip cutting into his bone. In other words, if we're wise we learn to look at the dangers around us and not wait for them to hit us full force before we say, "I've had enough of this dangerous samsara; I'm ready to get out." Or, "I've had enough of this particular way of acting; I'll have to learn how to stop."

They say in AA that someone really has to hit rock bottom before he's willing to learn anything from the program. That's the way human nature normally is. Even then, there are people who hit rock bottom and still don't learn. So it's more a question of your discernment in seeing when it's time to give up a sense of self esteem that's based on a rickety foundation, one that constantly has to be shored up to the point where people suffer. Most people never learn. They suffer horribly just because they want to retain a little scrap of self respect here or there. So take that lesson and apply it to yourself, looking back at your past mistakes.

Don't be afraid to look there, for if you're afraid to look there you're maintaining a delusion. And that delusion is going to hurt you further down the line.

So it's either/or. Which sense of wellbeing are you going to choose: the wellbeing built on the shaky ground of already being a good person, or the wellbeing of having the attitude that you're always willing to learn? The first attitude is the one to drop. The second attitude is the one that offers hope, that's based on a much more solid foundation, for there's always the possibility to keep learning and learning and learning. When you're dealing with difficult things from the past, have the attitude that, "At least I'm going to learn from this." That shifts the foundation onto something much more solid, so that you're not making your happiness depend on something you *know* is going to be washed away by the waves of time. It's a foundation based on a much more clear-eyed sense of fear, focused on what should appropriately be feared—the unwillingness to learn—for that's what keeps people blind. That's what keeps people suffering.

This unwillingness to learn is something we all suffer from, and we all need to learn how to overcome it. Only when we can overcome it do we actually start learning lessons. Otherwise we go through life refusing to learn the lessons that are potentially there. So try to be the sort of person who picks up lessons quickly, because the more quickly you pick them up the less you suffer. It's as simple as that. And the suffering that comes from being slow to pick up lessons or from being unwilling to pick up lessons: *That's* something really worth being afraid of.

The Buddha encouraged his son, Rahula, to make the willingness to learn at all times the basis for his practice. And he explained to Rahula how to learn: You look at your actions and you look at the results. When the results turn out to be harmful, you're not ashamed to talk them over with someone else. Talk them over with someone who has experience on the path. Get that person's perspective and then resolve not to make that mistake again.

When you do things properly—your intention is skillful and no unhappy results come—then you can take joy in the practice. This is where that sense of self esteem is properly placed: Take joy that you're continuing to grow in the practice.

And just that shift in attitude makes all the difference in the world.

The Middleness of the Path

August 13, 2004

This path we're following: There's a way in which you could call it sensitivity training—getting more and more sensitive to the way the mind creates suffering for itself. As you deal with a layer of blatant suffering, you peel it away and find another, more subtle one. This is a lot of what the training in discernment is about: working from the blatant layers to the more subtle ones by trying to stay on the path. The Buddha called it a middle way, and getting that sense of middleness, or balance, is a lot of our training in discernment.

If you've ever looked at a balance, you see that the two sides don't stay balanced all the time. They swing back and forth before they can come to a point of equilibrium. And we have to learn to anticipate that in the practice. Sometimes you lean too far to the left and then too far to the right, back and forth like this before you come to any kind of balance. A lot of the wisdom and discernment that come in the path lie in learning how to negotiate all the back and forth, when you follow a particular tack in your practice and then find that it goes too far. You've got to turn around and go back the other way, and often you'll find you've gone too far the other way, too, so you have to turn around and come back, back and forth like this. The wisdom lies in learning how to deal with the back and forth and not get frustrated with it, realizing that when you make mistakes you're learning lessons. When you learn from your mistakes, you'll ultimately be able to reach balance and learn how to regain it quickly whenever it gets knocked to either side.

The other aspect of the middleness of the path is that it's appropriate for whatever comes up. In other words, it doesn't just call for middling effort all the time. Sometimes your effort has to be strong, sometimes it has to be very, very subtle. And again, mastering this point requires sensitivity.

The Buddha once talked about two kinds of Right Effort. Some kinds of suffering, he said, require a really concerted effort to deal with them; others simply require that you watch. This is a lesson we can learn with the breath. Sometimes there are levels of discomfort in the breath you can actually deal with, patterns of tension in the body you can work through, by experimenting, by trying this, trying that, making the breath longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow, changing your conception of the breath. But sometimes you run up against a brick wall. Nothing you do seems to help. The more you meddle with the breath, the more muddled it gets. Either you're too heavy-handed or too picky about

what kind of breathing is good enough for you. So you've got to back off and just watch for a while to see whether the problem is in the breath or in the mind.

And don't be too quick to come to conclusions. When you see an opening that seems to make sense—maybe this could be changed a little bit, maybe that could be changed a little bit—then you can get back to meddling with the breath again. Try things out. If they don't work, go back to just watching. The practice goes back and forth like this.

A lot of the discernment in the path comes with learning where the extremes are, how far you can push things, and when you have to stop and just watch for a while, trying to do as little as possible. If the breath seems too entangled—the more you work with it, the worst it gets—just tell yourself, "I'm not going to breathe. If the body wants to breathe then it can do it on its own, but I'm not going to participate." See what happens. Of course the body will have to breathe. Give it a chance to be unmeddled with for a while. Then you watch what an unmeddled breath is like, until you get a sense for it.

Sometimes the issue centers on how far you can get the mind to settle down. Given the level of concentration, given the level of mindfulness you have, maybe you can only settle it down a little bit for the time being, and yet you want more. It's not good enough, especially if you've had better meditations in the past. The current meditation isn't measuring up, so you try to push, push, push it back to where it was. Sometimes you can, sometimes you can't, because the pushing may be part of the problem. Or if you've been away from the practice for a while, the level of sensitivity in the mind is not what it was, particularly your sensitivity to what you're doing. When this happens, get the mind to settle down at least a little bit and then just stay there for a while—it may not be perfect, but it's good enough. Then watch. If you can see yourself causing any form of stress or suffering, you can drop it. That will move you to another level of sensitivity, and so you stay at that level for a while, and then just watch again.

So the middleness of the middle way actually means the appropriateness of what you're doing vis-à-vis the circumstances you've got. There are no hard and fast rules that you're not allowed to meddle with the breath at all, or that you have to be meddling all the time, or that you always have to push for greater and greater and greater levels of concentration. Sometimes you have to learn to be satisfied with what you've got.

You know the story about the foolish, inexperienced cow. She's got a nice meadow with nice water, but she looks over to the other mountain, and says to herself, "Gee, the grass over there looks pretty good, too. I wonder what the water tastes like over there." But to get there, she has to go down into a ravine. So the foolish, inexperienced cow heads down into the ravine, but because she's

foolish and inexperienced she gets stuck in the ravine. She can't even get back to her original meadow, much less to the other side.

What this means is that when you find a level of concentration, a level of comfort in the breath that seems okay, stick with it for a while. See if you can maintain it. Watch it. Don't push too hard to make it any better, until you see clearly that there's a level of stress, a level of discomfort, a level of disturbance that really doesn't have to be there. That's when you can let that disturbance go, because the stillness allows you to see. One of the things it allows you to see is precisely what needs adjusting.

So the two go together—the doing and the watching—and there has to be a balance between the two. It's like walking. The easy way to walk is first with one foot and then with the other. That's a lot easier than trying to hop along just on your right foot or just on your left. This is what keeps the path on the middle: finding the balance between the two—balance not so much in the sense of a little bit of effort and a little bit of watching, but knowing when which one is appropriate, because you've got to have both. Sometimes you need more of one than the other, like the balance that swings back and forth before it comes to a perfect balance.

As Ajaan Chaa once said, we're groping our way in the practice. We like to think that we have the whole thing mapped out ahead of us, but if we knew the map entirely, and if our map were entirely perfect, we'd already be at the end of the path. The map we have is just a sketch, and we have to feel our way. Your willingness to feel your way, to learn from your mistakes, is what develops your wisdom, develops your discernment.

Sometimes it's a little chastening to see how little wisdom and discernment you have, but what are you going to do? You make use of what you've got. There's no way you can get more without using what you've got. It's like going down to the gym. You want to go to the gym to get exercise, but you feel embarrassed because your body is so weak and everybody else is so fit and strong. But if you're embarrassed, you never get down there to work out. So you take the body you've got and you exercise that. Only then will it turn into the body you want.

In the same way, if you only have a little bit of discernment and a little bit of concentration, make use of what you've got. Only when you make use of these things will they grow. Be content with what you've got—content not in the sense that you're going to stay here forever, but content with the fact that these are your raw materials, these are the tools you have. You want big muscles but you've only got little muscles. You can't wait until your muscles are big and then exercise. You exercise the little muscles you've got. That's where big muscles

come from. You've got to start where you are. And being very clear about what you've got is a lot of what you learn as you practice.

There are times when the practice is intended to throw you up against situations where you come to the end of your rope, where you have to use your ingenuity to figure out what you should do next. As Ajaan Fuang said, if everything were handed to you on a platter you'd never develop discernment at all. It's by testing it and admitting mistakes, learning from your mistakes, getting clearer and clearer about exactly you've got here: That's how the path opens up.

The Buddha described nibbana as being immediately present, *sanditthiko*—right here in the here and now—but remember that time right after he gained Awakening where he reflected on whether he could teach or not. He was discouraged because nibbana was so subtle. He wondered how he could ever teach anybody, how anyone could learn what he had to teach. But he realized that people could be led to it, step by step. This is why our path is a gradual one, a step-by-step path, as we become more and more sensitive to what we're doing, more sensitive to the results, so that gradually we become more and more sensitive to what's actually right here. And it's in working with this issue—the middleness of the path, what's appropriate right now in terms of our concentration, in terms of staying with something, in terms of pushing a little bit more: That's how we get more and more sensitive to what's going on right here. In pursuing the middleness of the path we develop our discernment. And remember, a lot of discernment is seeing how foolish you've been, because that's the only way you're going to get wise.

So the image of the path is of the continental shelf off the coast of India: a long, gradual slope, followed by a sudden drop-off. We all like the idea of the sudden drop-off—the momentary insight that reveals everything in a flash—but you can't get to the drop-off without following the gradual slope of getting more and more subtle in your sensitivity. And a lot of the subtlety lies in seeing just where the middleness of the middle path lies.

Active Truth

April 7, 2005

The Buddha had a very active sense of the truth. True things on the conditioned level, he said, don't exist in isolation; they're part of a causal chain. They come from previous and co-existing conditions, and they affect conditions that come after them or together with them. And as for the truths we talk about, the truths that can be taught, those are active, too. They have an impact on the person who talks about them, and on the person who listens; they lead to certain kinds of actions. Because of this, the Buddha said that something that was false could not be useful, in the genuine sense of the term. There's a passage where he talks about different kinds of speech: speech that's true but not useful; speech that's true and useful. And then there's the question of whether people like to hear it or not. But there's no category for things that are useful and false.

What this means is that if you want to find a truth, one way of testing it is to see the impact it has. If it's genuinely useful, then it's a truth. And this is why the Buddha said that his teachings should be put to the test, because this is how you can know if they're true: by seeing what impact they have on your behavior. If you take a teaching and put it into practice, what does it do? What do *you* do? And what are the results of what you do? If you find the results really do have a good impact on the mind—that's a truth.

For instance, the teachings on karma: They ask you to accept four things: (1) There really is such a thing as an action that's done; this is not an illusion, it's not unreal. (2) We are responsible for our actions. In particular, there's a mental event, an intention informed by views, that causes those actions. (3) The action has an effect. And (4) the quality of the effect is determined by the quality of the mind state causing the action. The Buddha's proof for these principles is: What happens when you put them into action? What difference will they make? Well, think of what would happen if you *didn't* believe these things, if you felt that your acts didn't really matter, that they really weren't true, that the idea of a good or a bad action was somehow a fiction: Imagine the way you'd act. Or if you felt that you could do something but then hope for some higher being to come along and forgive you and erase the results of that action: How would you act then?

If you believe in the principle of action, then you're going to be very careful about what you do. You're going to check the results. Any mistake you make, you can take as a lesson—a mistake here being that you've harmed either

yourself or the people around you. That's the way the teaching is tested and put into effect. And you can see the effect. It does have a good impact on the way you act. You become more and more skillful, create less and less suffering for yourself and others. That's how the Buddha proves the principle of action, proves the principle of karma. He doesn't cite his own memories of previous lifetimes or proof that someone can have a consciousness that goes from one life to the next and then remember what had happened in previous lifetimes. That's not the proof.

When people say that all the Buddha's teachings have to be proved in an empirical way, they usually use this as an argument against the principle of karma, against the principle of rebirth. Most people can't remember their past lifetimes, therefore they can't prove the teaching, therefore it's not a relevant teaching, maybe not even Buddhist. That's the line of reasoning. But that kind of empirical proof is not what the Buddha had in mind. His proof is more pragmatic: Take a teaching, put it into effect, and see what results you get. If you get good results, that's a true teaching. But he also has room for what he calls "individual" truths versus "noble" truths. Sometimes you hear that the Buddha taught two levels of truth, but the only time he makes a distinction between two types of truth is this one: things that are true for you, individually, and things that are true for everybody, across the board. That's one of the meanings of "noble": standard, universal, all across the board.

As we're meditating, we're trying to sort through the things that are true for us individually so that ultimately we can get to noble truths, things that are true across the board. You find that when you meditate—you focus on your breath like this or that—it works, it gets good results. In the beginning you're dealing for the most part with individual truths, because sometimes a particular focus or a particular way of conceiving the breath is going to work for one session—in other words, it works for a particular problem—and the next time you sit down and meditate, it doesn't. That's because you've got a different problem. The old approach may have been true for that particular problem, but new problems pop up time and again.

You have to take note of what you learn from each session of sitting or walking meditation, and then test it the next time around. If it doesn't work the second time around, you can chalk it up either to the fact that you weren't observing carefully the first time—there were things that you missed—or that it was a solution to a different problem, not the problem you're facing now. In this way you begin to build up your body of knowledge, your body of individual truths. But if you work with them skillfully, you find that they head more and more toward the noble truths. You learn to sort things out in terms of stress and its cause, the path leading to the end of stress and the actual ending of stress. It's

when you hit that last one, which is formally the third noble truth: That's when you know you've hit the noble truths as a whole. You've understood them properly, you've performed the right tasks appropriate to each.

Even these truths are active truths. Stress is something the Buddha says to comprehend. Normally we want to run away from it or push it away, but the Buddha says that you've got to comprehend it. If you don't comprehend it, you can't get past it. It's like that riddle of the Sphinx: The Sphinx stands across the road with a riddle; anyone who comes up and can't answer the Sphinx's riddle gets eaten up. If you can answer the riddle, you get past. It's the same with stress: You've got to be able to answer the riddle of stress so that you can get past it.

As the Buddha said, our normal reaction to stress and pain is, one, bewilderment and, two, a search for a way out. The only way to get beyond your bewilderment is to sit and watch the stress. And the only way you can do that is to put the mind in a position where it doesn't feel threatened by the stress. That's what the path is for—and particularly the heart of the path: Right Concentration, putting the mind in a state of ease, even rapture, focused on one thing. This gives the mind a sense of power, a sense of safe haven, a safe place to go. When you have this sense of safe haven, you can begin to probe into things that you'd normally be afraid of.

To make another comparison, it's like fighting a dragon. If you know you have good, strong armor and the dragon's breath can't burn you, then you can get in close to the dragon and find its weak point.

This is why concentration is such an important part of the path. It puts you in a position of strength, where you can get intimate with the pain and yet not be anxious. It gives you a sense of confidence that when things get difficult, you don't have to worry. This is one of the reasons why the forest ajaans recommend going out into the wilderness, for when you get out there, all kinds of things can happen. If you sit there worrying about them, you can't stay. You end up running back. But if you have your wits about you, then you can get the mind into a state of concentration so that it doesn't fixate on all the dangers and problems of being in the wilderness. So that's one level of problem that concentration can help you overcome: your fears.

Second, when difficult things actually happen, you find that you can withstand them with your concentration. There's a great passage in the *Theragatha* where the monk is reflecting on the fact that he's in some pretty bad pain, he's really sick. "What are you going to do?" he asks himself. "There's no medicine, no doctor, and nobody around to help. As you stay here in the grove, what are you going to do—are you going to run away?" "No," he answers, "I'm going stay here and I'm going to focus on the four frames of reference and the seven factors for Awakening. That'll be the mind's protection."

In other words, he realizes that his safety lies in looking after the mind. You look after the body to the extent that you can, but then you have to realize that this is a dying body. It's like those cars made with planned obsolescence—it's designed to fall apart at some point. There comes a time when no matter how much you worry about it, how much you try to fight off death, the body's still going to go on its own. Your only safety lies in developing these qualities of mind. Sometimes the power of mind can actually heal the body. But there will come times when it can't. Still, at that point it doesn't matter, when the powers of the mind are really strong. So this is why concentration is something you want to develop.

Again, sometimes you hear that when you're meditating, being mindful, and a good strong state of concentration comes along, you have to be wary of getting attached to the concentration, so just let it come, let it go. And somehow in that way you transcend the attachment. Well, that's not what the Buddha taught. Concentration is to be developed. You take time, you work at it. Even if it involves a certain amount of attachment, it's attachment to a good thing. It's like holding on to the rungs of a ladder: You don't want to let go of one rung unless you've got your hand on another rung or you've finally reached the roof. That's when you can get off the ladder totally, and you're safe on the roof. As Ajaan Fuang once said, don't be afraid of getting attached to a state of concentration; be afraid that you won't *get* to the concentration, or that you won't be able to maintain it. Once you're there, once you're attached to it, then you can work on the attachment.

So the path is nothing to be feared—after all, the Buddha said, the pleasure of concentration is nothing to be feared. It's something to be developed.

This is how you prove the truth of his teachings. You work with them and you find that they really do lead to the end of suffering. That's when you've got your proof. Up to that point, things haven't yet been proven. They haven't gone beyond the level of linguistic convention. Certain things will give you a sense of confidence—you see results here and there—but only when things open up to the Deathless will you have your proof. You've seen suffering stop, and nobody can say that you haven't. That's when you know for sure that what the Buddha taught was true: There is a Deathless and it can be attained through human effort.

But the teachings require that you, too, be true. You have to be honest in your effort. When your effort doesn't measure up to what the Buddha taught, you can't say that you've proven his teachings false. You've simply chipped away at them a little bit, but you haven't done enough yet to prove them one way or the other. Be honest with yourself—that's how you can really test the path. In other words, as Ajaan Lee once said, to know the truth of the Buddha's teaching you

have to be true, too—true in the active sense: not just knowing true things, but true in your actions. And the proof of your truth comes when you hit the Deathless. That's when you know that you can rely on yourself. As the Buddha said, those who have reached the stream in this way will never intentionally do anything wrong because they've seen the principle of action, the truth of action, and the action of truth. And they'll never intentionally be false again.

No Preferences

July 20, 2005

The Canon tells us that the Buddha's contemporaries fell into two main camps: what you might call absolutists and relativists. The absolutists were the ones who had a theory about the nature of reality, saying that their theory was true and everything else was false. "The world is made out of atoms": That's one of their theories. Or, "The world is infinite," "The world is not infinite," "The world is eternal," "The world is not eternal": a long list of views about the world outside. And what those views usually come down to is that it's impossible for human action to have any real impact on things, because the nature of the world is fixed.

At the other extreme are the relativists: those who hold that what you say about reality all depends on how you look at things, or who refuse to take any stance at all. Their stance, if you follow it to its logical conclusion, makes it impossible to do anything either, because if the world is totally chaotic, totally random—nothing is really set, nothing is really for certain—what are you going to do? Just muddle around? Some of them advised grabbing whatever pleasure you can because there's no telling what's going to happen the next moment, the next day down the line.

Just now we chanted the Buddha's first sermon, and you notice that he doesn't start out with either an absolutist or a relativist stance. He's talking about courses of action. He says that if you do this, these are the results. If you indulge in sensuality, these are the results. If you indulge in self-mortification, those are the results, and neither gets any really good results. However, he said, there is a middle path, and it's not a path worked out by reasoning through, or applying logic. It was arrived at simply by trying different paths and seeing what worked. He said this middle path is the path that leads to really desirable results: the end of suffering. It gives rise to vision, gives rise to knowledge, brings about peace, knowledge, nibbana.

So that's what makes the Buddha's teaching special: He had found a path of action. That's what's worth talking about: looking at which paths of action lead to suffering, which ones lead to the end of suffering, and then following the one that leads to the end of suffering, whether you like the path or not.

There's a poem in China, attributed to the third patriarch, which starts out saying that the great way is not hard for those with no preferences. I don't know what the third patriarch had in mind when he said that, but if you apply it to the

Buddha's approach, the only way to make sense of it is this: You do what has to be done, whether you like it or not.

There's a sutta where the Buddha defines wisdom and discernment in terms of how you handle four courses of action. The first two are the things you like to do that give good results, and the things you don't like to do that give bad results. Those two are not hard. They're no-brainers. You avoid the things that you don't like and give bad results, and you do the things you like to do and give good results. It's all very easy. The difficult issues, and the ones that really test your discernment, are the next two courses of action: the things you like to do that give bad results, and things you don't like to do that give good results. That's where your preferences get in the way. That's where your preferences make it hard.

So you have to learn how to look past your preferences, because there are times when the path really does require a lot of effort. You may say to yourself, "I don't want to do this, I don't like this," and you wriggle around and find all kinds of excuses, but in the end what happens? You don't get the results you want, because you've made it hard for yourself. Sometimes you have the other attitude—the macho attitude—and yet there are aspects of the path that require just watching, being very patient, very still. Your macho side may not like that. As for the things you like to do, you say "I don't see what's wrong with this." You make all kinds of excuses and, again, in the end, you don't get the results you want.

This is one of those areas where each person has to develop his or her own discernment: How are you going to get past your preferences?

The only way is to look at the situation and to try out various things to see what works. When you find what works, then whether you like it or not, you follow it. If your preferences complain, figure out ways of dealing with them to put them aside. Discernment doesn't mean just seeing the right course of action; it also involves mastering the right way to put your preferences aside. Remind yourself that your preferences have gotten in the way, have gummed up the works, for a long, long time. How much longer are you going to side with them?

And how do you put them aside? Learn to observe them and see how they arise and pass away. See how they're not-self, that you don't have to identify with them. When you see something and a sense of liking or a disliking arises, you don't have to get involved. When the liking and disliking have nobody to play with, they go away. It's like that other Zen conundrum, the sound of one hand. When the liking comes up and you don't respond: That's the sound of one hand.

Once you get down to doing what simply has to be done, the path gets a lot easier. In other words you're not adding difficulties on top of it. If you don't make it unnecessarily difficult, it's pretty manageable.

Look at the elements of the path: It doesn't contain anything superhuman, anything that requires you to exhaust yourself. In fact, a lot of the path lies in learning how to husband your energy so that you don't waste it on unskillful things. When you don't waste it on unskillful things, you've got extra energy for the skillful ones. So on the days when the situation really does require that you sit for a long period of time to work through a difficult issue, you've got the energy to draw on, because you didn't fritter it away with trivial pursuits. In particular you haven't frittered it away trying to justify your preferences.

This is the way life is: It's going to present you with difficult situations many, many times, whether you want them or not. If you can put yourself in the mood where you're up for whatever arises, things are a lot easier. The day is going to come when your death is going to stare you right in your face, and of course most people don't want that. They run away and they try to wiggle out of it in all kinds of ways, yet the more they wiggle, the worse things get. But if you've been following the path with no regard for your preferences, then when death comes you can tell yourself, "This is what I've been practicing for all this time, so let's do it right this time." Memories of your life will start arising at that point and you'll see things you're going to miss, things you regret having done. You can't let yourself get involved with those things, for they make things harder.

This is why we sit here pulling the mind away from its distractions. When you die there are going to be monstrous distractions, and they're going to pull you strongly in their direction right when you're at your weakest. If you simply give in to them, it's going to have a major impact on how your rebirth is going to go. If you can maintain your calm center in the midst of whatever comes up, things will be a lot easier. Bad things will come up, good things will come up, so you'll want to maintain your center. Don't get excited by the good things. Don't get upset by the bad.

It sounds like meditation instructions, but it's also death instructions: how to die properly. *Death* is easy for those with no preferences—and one aspect of this great way we're practicing here is getting ready for that fact. Life, of course, is a lot easier if you have no preferences, too. This doesn't mean that you don't have any goals or desires at all, simply that you do what has to be done.

If, when you sit down, your mind is a mess, you don't say, "Well today is a bad day to meditate, I'm going to wait until some other time." You learn how to sit with a mind that's a mess, and begin to see the little threads of the possibility of finding some peace in the midst of the mess. When you can do that, you've learned a really important lesson, a much more important lesson than if you say,

“Well, things are bad, so I’m just not going to tackle them.” That doesn’t teach you any lessons at all. The mind may not settle down as much as you’d like, but at least you’ve learned some important skills in how to deal with difficult situations. You may think, “I don’t want a difficult situation right now,” but there it is. What are you going to do? You do your best. And you figure out what *is* the best you can do, given the situation.

Then there are the times when things are easy. The mind settles down quickly and is very still, and the mind says, “Okay, what’s next? Let’s move on to insight.” Well, maybe you have to get your concentration solidified before you’re really ready to develop insight. There are many, many examples of people who’ve gotten a little bit of stillness and wanted to jump straight for insight, and end up jumping right off the cliff.

So wherever you are on the path, you do what has to be done. Don’t let your preferences get in the way. When you can manage that, then it’s not a question of being easy or difficult: You just do what has to be done. When you develop that attitude—that you’re willing to do what has to be done—you get the results you want. And sometimes the results are better than what you could have ever thought of wanting.

Licking Yourself Clean

May 25, 2005

The Buddha once said that one of the prerequisites for concentration is a sense of comfort, ease, and wellbeing— both physical and mental. One of the reasons we recite those chants on goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity is to create a sense of wellbeing in the mind. Thoughts of goodwill are good thoughts to think. They feel good. They put the mind at ease. You don't have to struggle with anybody. You don't have to settle any old scores. It feels good to be thinking good thoughts. It helps put you in the right mood to meditate.

Physically, you work first with your posture. You want to sit straight. You don't want to lean over or sit hunched over. Keep your back straight— comfortably straight. Then you work with the breath. Does the breath feel good? Notice where exactly you feel the breath—which parts of the body have sensations that let you know that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out. How do those sensations feel? Are they tight, restricted? If they are, think of their loosening up a little bit. Or do they get tight at a particular spot in the breath cycle? You may want to shorten the breath or lengthen it.

Approach this as you would any skill. You learn from your mistakes. One of the first things you learn as you work with the breath is that you're clumsy. You tend to put too much pressure on it. You approach it with an attitude that's too controlling or too tight. But that doesn't mean you should stop working with the breath. It's like the first time you sit down to play the piano. You sit down, and realize you can't play Beethoven. There are three ways of reacting to that. One is to get up and never touch the piano again. Another is to keep playing 4'33"—the John Cage piece where you just sit at the piano and don't do anything at all. And the other is to keep practicing, starting with simple pieces. Learn to listen to your playing, see what you can improve, and gradually get better and better until you *can* play Beethoven. This is how piano playing becomes a skill. This is how any skill gets developed. You explore that boundary line between what you can control and what you can't.

The way to explore it is by poking here, adjusting there, knowing that you probably will make some mistakes but not getting too worried about it because you learn from your mistakes. Over time you get more and more sensitive to exactly how much control is too much, how much is too little, and you develop a wide range of techniques. When there's pain in the body, what's the best way to

breathe? When you're tired, what's the best way to breathe? When you're tense, what's the best way to breathe? These are things you can explore.

The whole point of this is that in the course of doing these things, you develop your own sensitivity as to what works and what doesn't. Your standards for what works and what doesn't get more refined. This is how discernment gets developed in the practice. It's not a matter of reading a few books, getting a few ideas, and then cloning your mind to those ideas so that you see things as they're described in the books. That's not discernment. It's just adding one more layer of perceptions on top of the layers you already have. Discernment comes from your ability to see the mind in action and to be sensitive as to when the mind's actions are giving good results and when they aren't. You have to be your own judge. In other words, instead of throwing all the responsibility onto the texts or onto the teachers, you take on the job of learning to be a good judge of your actions.

Ajaan Fuang once said that meditators tend to be like little puppies. They go out and defecate and then come running to their mothers to have their mothers lick them off. They haven't learned how to lick themselves off yet. So as a meditator you need to learn how to lick yourself off. If things don't go well, learn how to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and then figure out what went wrong. Take responsibility for your meditation. Take responsibility for your insights. This is what the Buddha did. This is what every meditator has to do.

If you go to a teacher, saying you've had a certain experience, and the teacher identifies it as a level of jhana or a level of insight, can you be sure? Do you really want to hand those judgments over to somebody else? Or do you want to learn how to judge things on your own, so that you can trust yourself? If you let the other people do the judging, there's always going to be an element of doubt: Do they know what they're saying? At the same time, you're absolving yourself of any responsibility. Discernment becomes *their* duty and not yours. That's not a good attitude for a meditator to take. You've got to learn to look, to try a few things.

For instance, what is it like just to let the breath come in and out on its own? What is it going to do? Figure out how to watch it. Then figure out how to nudge it, what to think in order to make it more comfortable. Then figure out how to judge the results. This is how discernment is developed, how meditation becomes a skill. As it becomes more and more of a skill, you become more sensitive to even the slightest bit of discomfort both in the body and in the mind. That's how you see the four noble truths. You see stress, you see how it's caused, you connect it to your own actions. You see what you do or don't do that lets the stress be shed away.

So think of the meditation as an experiment, something you try. You're trying to prove a hypothesis: that you can put an end to suffering. Now, scientists like

to see their hypothesis proved, but good scientists are willing to admit when it isn't, when the experiment actually proves something else. You chalk it up to experience and you try again.

The instructions for breath meditation involve discernment, and they also involve training yourself. To train in any skill you need desire—the desire to actually do the practice—and you have to be open and aboveboard about that. Don't try to deny the fact that there's desire. Just learn how to use it skillfully.

Then there has to be persistence. You stick with the practice. Try it again and again and again. But persistence is not just a matter of the hours you put in. You also have to be intent, to pay very careful attention to what you're doing, what the results are. Finally, you need to use your intelligence, which means using ingenuity and being discerning in what works, what doesn't, and how you might try to improve on both. These four qualities are called the bases for success. They're essential to any skill.

So approach the meditation as a skill. Remember how you learned skills in the past. If it was music or art, a sport, carpentry, whatever: How did you go about mastering that skill? A lot of times you made mistakes. You noticed that they were mistakes but you didn't give up. You went back and tried it over again, trying to observe what you did wrong, what you did right, what worked and what didn't. Over time, your hands—which originally seemed to be all thumbs—gradually became human hands: a carpenter's hands, a violinist's hands. And your mind became a craftsman's mind. You reached a point where you didn't have to go running to somebody else to pass judgment on whether you did it right or not. You began to know yourself whether it was right or not. That's when you really mastered the skill.

The same principle applies to the breath. We spend so much of our lives being desensitized to the breath energy in the body—how we actually feel the body from within. We've been so intent on learning other things outside that, to make room for them, we've blocked out this part of our awareness. Now's the time to back up and get more sensitive to this area of your awareness again, to see how it feels, to see how your perceptions of what the breath does are going to affect how the breath actually flows through the body. Experiment to see how you can work both with the breath and with the perceptions of the breath to make it more comfortable, so that you've got that prerequisite for the mind to settle down and get concentrated: a sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing. The body sitting here seems to have a nice flow of energy throughout. It's not blocked. The blood seems to be flowing through all parts of the body. Your focus isn't interfering with it. You feel good just sitting here. The amount of pressure you put on the present moment is just right: not too light, not too heavy. That's something that comes with practice.

So, pay careful attention to what you're doing, because that's how you learn.
That's how the meditation becomes your own.

The End of Uncertainty

May 5, 2005

Very few things in life are certain. Even the thoughts we *know* to be true: To what extent are they really true? If you think of truth as the correspondence between your thought and the thing it represents, no thought can be totally true. Each thought is just a sketch. There's no one thought that can comprehend all the many levels of truth out there. Each thought is just an approximation.

So the question turns from representation to one of pragmatism: To what extent is the approximation useful? It may leave a lot out, it may not really encompass the thing, but if it serves a purpose, the thought is useful. The question then is, what's the best purpose for thoughts to serve? That's where you have to look for a truth that's not just a thought, something you really can be certain about in and of itself. And there's really only one truth that can pass that test, only one truth you really can be certain about, and that's when there's suffering and when there's not. You don't have to ask. If you experience it, you know.

And right there is where the Buddha staked all of his teachings: suffering arising, suffering passing away. Everything else he taught is arranged around that, even Right View: It's right to the extent that it helps put an end to suffering. Your thoughts are skillful or unskillful, your words and your deeds are skillful and unskillful, depending on the extent to which they put an end to suffering.

So always keep this principle in mind as thoughts come in and out of your mind. You may have heard that the Buddha taught, say, that there is no self. To what extent is the non-self teaching skillful? Where is it not skillful? Those are the questions he would have you look at, not the question of whether there is or is not a self. There are a lot of things that could be true, but this may not be the right time to think about those things. The Buddha has a teaching on Right Speech, where he says that speech can be true or not true, beneficial or not beneficial, welcome or unwelcome. He said to speak only those things that are true and beneficial. And as for the question of whether they're welcome or not welcome, he said look for the right time and place to speak.

The same principle applies to our thoughts. There's a time and a place for different types of thinking. There are times when having a strong sense of self is very useful, very beneficial, and other times when it's precisely the thing that gets in the way. The question is, "How do you know?" And the answer is, "Through trial and error" — something we don't like to hear. We'd like to have a

nice formula set out. Sometimes the Buddha does set out a formula for us, but in many areas he doesn't, precisely because it's more important for us to gain our own sensitivity to our thoughts and their results. When you think something, what happens as a result? And particularly, to what extent does it cause stress? That's what you've got to look into, and that's why we're meditating here: to get a greater sense of sensitivity as to what's causing stress in our minds, to see how it's not necessary, to see how we can let go of the cause. Then, when there seems to be relief, keep watching it for a while, because there may still be some stress in there.

The Buddha maps things out in terms of levels of stress. Even in the practice of Right Concentration, there are levels of stress. Just because the mind seems still doesn't mean that the job is done. Even when there's a great sense of luminosity or of all-encompassing awareness, the job may not be over. You've got to learn how to keep looking. I've known some people who've been through the sort of education that aims at fostering self esteem, and the problem with that is that it fosters complacency. It teaches them not to learn how to judge the results of their actions. Everything they do is supposed to be good, a cause for self esteem, and yet they may be doing a lot of harm. So the important thing is for them to learn how to be sensitive to the harm that comes from their thoughts, words, and deeds.

This applies not only outwardly, but also inwardly, in the practice of meditation. When you do something, look for the results. When you say something, look for the results. When you think something, look for the results. When you work with the breath, look for the results. Breath training is an especially good way to learn how to be sensitive to the results of your thinking. There are different ways of focusing on the breath, different ways of conceiving the breath, different ways of dealing with the hindrances. And your job is to learn how to be sensitive to the results of those ways, to figure out which way of focusing is right for right now, which way of thinking is right for right now, which way of being still is right for right now. There are some guidelines, but the most important thing is to learn how to judge for yourself, for without that sensitivity there's no way you're going to see the really subtle levels of stress in the mind. This is where and why we have to be observant.

When the Buddha talks about developing mindfulness and concentration, he places a lot of emphasis on alertness. In the few places where he actually defines alertness, he points to being alert to what you're doing. In the body, when you move your hand, be alert to the fact that you're moving your hand. When you look left, look right, be alert to the fact that you're looking left, looking right. Then moving into the mind: When there are feelings, be alert to what you're doing in the feeling, in the perception, in the thought fabrication, in the

consciousness. Each of these things contains an element of fabrication, an element of present intention. Do you ever notice that? Do you see it happening? If you can't yet see it happening, look at what you *can* see that you're adding to the present moment. And be sensitive at the same time to any sense of stress there. See what you can do to minimize the stress, for only when you learn how to minimize the stress that you *can* see, do you start becoming sensitive to the subtler levels.

In this way you learn how to be a connoisseur of your actions, and particularly a connoisseur of actions and events in the mind. A connoisseur of food has to develop a very refined palate; a connoisseur of music, a very refined ear. What you're trying to do is to develop a refined sensitivity to what's going on in the mind. This requires a whole cluster of mature attitudes concerning how you respond when you do things right, when you do things wrong, so that you can learn from when you've done things right and done things wrong. If you get depressed over a mistake, that's unskillful. Notice that. If you get careless after doing something right, notice that as well. The Buddha doesn't tell you not to take pride in being skillful. Actually, a sense of pride, a sense of satisfaction when you've done something right is an important inducement in the path. It gives you the juice you need to keep going. But you've got to be sensitive to when and where that sense of pride turns into carelessness.

The same when you do things wrong: You have to recognize when you've made a mistake, but you can't let that recognition become debilitating. Again, learn to be sensitive to the spot where the recognition of a mistake leads to unskillful reactions and learn to cut it off at the pass. As you get more sensitive to the results of your actions and to the alternatives open to you, you don't have to follow through on unskillful patterns of thought. As the Buddha said, if you had to stick with the patterns or habits you already have, there would be no sense in teaching you. It wouldn't do any good. He says it's because people *can* learn to be more skillful: That's why he taught.

So learn to be alert to what you're doing, alert to the results of what you're doing. Even a simple thing like focusing on the breath is an important way to develop your powers of alertness, your powers of evaluation and judgment. Learn to be a connoisseur of your breathing, and then a connoisseur of the thinking that goes around the breath. That's when you find yourself arriving at something really certain, even more certain than the arising and passing away of suffering. It's the total ending of suffering. That's when you know for sure that you've done things right. There's nothing more certain than that.

Habits of Perception

November 27, 2004

What have you got here in the present moment? You've got the body, you've got the breath, you've got thoughts, and you've got your awareness. But you're also carrying a lot of habits. In fact, this is the main issue in the meditation. If you didn't have certain habits of perception, you wouldn't be creating suffering for yourself right now. You may not seem to be suffering much, but there's always some stress that you're creating through a lack of skill. And this is precisely what we're trying to uncover as we meditate.

Some of the baggage you're bringing into the present moment consists of issues you've picked up in the course of the day: things this person said, that person did, things you yourself said or did. In some cases it's as if you've been a garbage collector, gathering up the day's trash. If you're going to get any peace in the next hour, you've got to throw it out.

But the issues also go deeper than that. If that were the only issue, you could go off and live alone where you wouldn't have to interact with people, and that would be the end of the problem. But it's not the end of the problem. When you go off to live by yourself, the habits of the mind start looming even larger. The less contact you have with people, the more likely your habits are to go out of bounds. You can get into some really weird feedback loops when you're living alone.

So the Buddha sets out maps, he sets out instructions, for how to cut through those feedback loops and to understand how your perceptions shape things in a way that brings suffering. He also shows you how to perceive things in a new way that will end those habits and cut through that suffering, so that ultimately when there's a perception of the breath or any of the sensory input you have in the present moment, there's no suffering added on. The input is the only disturbance you have. There's no greed, anger, or delusion to muck up the works.

As the Buddha said, the problem all comes down to ignorance. Ignorance of what? Ignorance of the four noble truths—and he's not talking about not having read about the four noble truths. All of us here have read about them and thought about them. Ignorance means not seeing things *in terms of* the four noble truths. We see things in other terms, the big ones being our sense of self, our sense of the things that belong to us, and our sense of the reality of the world out there—what exists, what doesn't exist out there. Once we place our faith in these

perceptions, we become a slave to them. Our idea of objective reality places a lot of imperatives on us. Our idea of who we are places a lot of imperatives on us, and these are the imperatives that make us suffer.

So the Buddha teaches us to learn how to question those perceptions. There's a passage where he talks about how people are a slave to a duality or a polarity between existence and non-existence: Does the world out there really exist? Does it not really exist? He advises learning how to avoid that polarity by simply watching things arising and passing away in the present moment. Stay just at that level and don't get involved in the question of whether there's anything lying behind the mere experience of arising and passing away.

And the best way to do that is to give yourself a framework. This is what the four establishings of mindfulness or four frames of reference are all about: giving yourself a framework so that you're not blown away by the events of the world. See things within the frame of body, feelings, mind states, or mental qualities, in and of themselves. Make those your frames of reference—as when you're dealing with the breath right now: just the breath coming in, going out. In this context, thoughts have meaning only to the extent that they pull you away from the breath or don't pull you away from the breath. While you're sitting here, ideally that's the only question: how the thoughts impinge on the breath. Thoughts that are useful in keeping you with the breath are the ones you want to encourage. Thoughts that pull you away, you want to let go.

In the Buddha's words, you abandon greed and distress with reference to the world—the world here being the world of the senses. Only when you abandon greed and distress with reference to these things can you look at how they're directly experienced. See how sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations are experienced right here in the present moment, in and of themselves. If you can watch these things arising and passing away simply in and of themselves, the whole issue of what exists out there or what doesn't exist out there gets put aside. As you watch things arise, the idea that there's nothing out there doesn't occur to you. As you watch them pass away, the idea that there's something out there permanent, lasting, existing independently of you, doesn't occur to you either. You see that the issues of existence and non-existence matter only if you *make* them an issue.

The Buddha's not saying that things do or don't exist out there, it's just that in this mental state the issue doesn't occur to you. This is the mental state you want to develop, because all that's left is simply the issue of the arising and passing away of stress and suffering. That gets you right in line with the four noble truths and their imperatives: the imperative to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation, and develop the path leading to its cessation. These

imperatives, unlike those of the world, are liberating, which is why you want to take them on.

The first one is to comprehend suffering so that you can begin to see what you're doing to give rise to the suffering. This is what focuses you on the real job at hand. You start seeing the fabrication of worlds in the mind, realizing that the world as you perceive it out there is really your own mental construct.

You have lots of different mental constructs about the world out there. Sometimes you think about the world in geological terms, sometimes in cosmic, astronomical terms, sometimes simply in terms of your own personal narrative, day to day. There are many different levels that are useful for different purposes. You want to put yourself in the state of mind where you can choose which view of the world is useful right here, right now, so you're not a slave to the imperatives that these different views put on you.

The same with your notion of self: Is there a self? Is there no self? The Buddha says, "Don't ask." So much of our life depends on the idea of who we are. If you really look at the arising and passing away of your sense of self, seeing how it's a construct just the way your sense of the world is a construct, then you're in a much better position. You can use different ideas of the self to function in different ways and then drop them when they're no longer useful. But all this is possible only if you keep in mind as your basic framework the question of what gives rise to suffering, what kind of action doesn't give rise to suffering, or what kind of action leads you to the end of suffering—the basic framework of the four noble truths, seeing your experience in those terms rather than in terms of the world or the self. Then you can see the activities that you do—the fabrications you make, bodily, verbal, and mental—simply as strategies, useful or not, skillful or not, in line with the imperatives of those four truths.

And that's liberating. On the one hand, you find that you can function a lot more skillfully as you open up to the idea that there might be more courses of action open to you than you had imagined. If you have a very definite idea of who you are or the type of person you are, you place limits on what you can do. If you have very fixed ideas about the world out there, that, too, limits what you can do in terms of putting an end to suffering and stress.

So what we're trying to do as we meditate here is give ourselves the frame of reference from which we can call into question our habitual ideas of the world, our habitual ideas of the self, to see how both of them are fabrications made out of the way we look at things, the way we attend to things, the way we perceive things. Similarly with the intentions that are based on those ways of looking at the world, looking at the self: We can start calling them into question, looking for alternatives, testing alternatives, with the overriding concern of seeing what we

can do to put an end to all the stress and suffering we're causing through our unskillful intentions.

As you look at your experience in these terms—the constant questioning of what you're doing and what results you're getting out of what you do—you can open yourself to whole new dimensions inside. You can use your ingenuity to figure out new ways of acting, new ways of interacting with your perceptions of the world, new ways of interacting with your perceptions of self, that free you from the stress and suffering that deep down inside you think are a necessary part of being a human being. This is so much of what the Buddha's teaching is about: freeing you from your own self-imposed limitations.

Think of all those people who told young Prince Siddhartha that there was no way he could put an end to suffering. "The best people in the history of the world have all suffered in this way," they said, "so who are you to say that it's not necessary?" Still, the prince said there must be some other way. He had the ability to imagine that there would be another way, and the guts to devote his life to finding if it were true. And finally he found that, yes, what he conceived as a possibility wasn't just a leap of the imagination. It was an actuality. This opened a vast new range of possibilities—for the whole human race—of what a human being can do.

Take, for instance, his analysis of the four types of action. Most people would only think of the first three: things that give rise to good results within the normal course of the world, things that give rise to bad, things that give rise to mixed results. But the Buddha found that there was another kind of action that leads to the end of action, to the end of suffering. That was his great discovery.

Notice, it was a kind of *action* he discovered, based on certain views, based on certain perceptions, based on certain ways of looking at experience, and then following through in line with them. So as we're practicing meditation, remember that perception and attention—the way we perceive things, the questions we ask about the things we perceive—are the two main issues we have to focus on.

This is one of the reasons we put so much emphasis on concentration, for the levels of concentration are perception attainments. Can you hold onto a particular perception so that the mind can really settle there? See what it does to your experience. When you stick with the perception of the breath as filling the body, what does that do to the physical sense of the breath? When you perceive the breath as being able to come in and out of the body anywhere at all, what does that do? What effect does it have on the mind? When you get to the formless perceptions, such as infinite space: What in the realm of your experience right here corresponds to infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness,

neither perception nor non-perception? We investigate these things to see the power of perception, so that ultimately we can let it go.

So this is a very important thing to focus on as you meditate and as you go through the course of the day: how you perceive things. You can begin with simply how you perceive your interactions with other people. Notice how much of your perception of the situation is just that, your perception. We talk about the garbage we collect in the course of the day: How much of that garbage is self-produced? To put it really crudely, how much of it is just your own shit that you're carrying around? This is not to say that other people aren't behaving in evil, outrageous, or horrible ways. There *are* people like that in the world, but if your peace of mind were totally dependent on everybody else's behaving themselves, you'd be their slave. You'd never get free. But as the Buddha said, the whole issue of suffering is something we can overcome through our own efforts. This means that we have to look at the suffering we create for ourselves. As for what other people are doing, that's their responsibility. It doesn't have to impinge on us.

And as for the baggage we carry around: If we had to go back and straighten out all the horrible things we did in the past before we could gain Awakening, we'd never be done. But it turns out that when you simply learn to drop old habits, Awakening is possible. After all, the suffering you're experiencing right now is a combination of things coming from the past and things you're doing right now, including the way you're perceiving things right now.

A frequent image in meditation instructions is that all you have to do is turn on a light and the darkness goes away. No matter how many eons the darkness has reigned, all you have to do is turn on the light once and that's the end of the darkness. All you have to do is work on how you're perceiving things in the present moment and when things finally click, you don't have to worry about what other people tell you, you don't have to worry about the world, you don't have to worry about the self, you don't have to worry about what you've done in the past, for you've learned a new habit, you've developed a new skill. And the development of that new skill changes everything.

A Multilingual Mind

April 2, 2005

One of the things you notice in meditation as you start looking at your thoughts, looking at your feelings, looking at sensory input, is that the solidity of your world starts dissolving away—both your sense of the world outside and your sense of yourself inside. And in some cases, just that much feels liberating—free from the heavy burdens you normally carry around. You begin to see that the heaviness is something you yourself have invested these things with. But that lack of solidity is not total liberation. The reason we want to let things seem less solid in this way, is so that we can see patterns we'd otherwise miss.

You notice that when the Buddha summarizes the essence of his Awakening—at least the part that's worth teaching, worth passing on—he focuses on the principle of causality, the connection between things. In particular, he focuses on the connections between what he calls name and form on one hand and consciousness on the other. Starting with this connection, he points out how suffering is built on top of it. The important elements of name and form are contact and intention. The way you regard the contact is another element of name and form, called attention. But here contact means not only contact at the senses, but also contact among different things going on in the mind. From that kind of contact you make choices, you make up your mind, you want to do this, you want to do that. You have an intention that leads to actions.

The Buddha wants you to see this. This is the process of fabrication. This is how we create our worlds, how we create our sense of self. And he wants you to look at it directly as it's happening. The reason we don't see it is because we divide things up into things that exist, things that don't exist, our self, and what lies outside of our self. This set of distinctions tends to point our attention away from what we're directly experiencing. The things we experience: Do they really exist? Do they not exist? In other words, is there something lying behind them? Is there nothing lying behind them? This kind of questioning pulls our attention away from what we're experiencing to focus on what we assume is either out there behind it or not out there behind it. We find ourselves placing our trust in things we don't even see, can't even experience.

The same with the distinction between self and things outside ourselves: When something is inside of our self, we don't observe it very well. We identify with it. It's like putting your foot into a shoe: Your foot starts getting shaped by the shoe without your really noticing it. As for things outside of yourself, you're

not really responsible for them. They don't matter so much. That's your attitude.

So both of these ways of looking at things pull your attention away from what the Buddha said is the real issue: how your intentions give rise to suffering, how the process of fabrication gives rise to suffering. He wants you to look at these things as a process so that you can understand the patterns. The first step is to see what kinds of fabrication are blatantly unskillful, so that you can learn how to drop them. And then as your sensitivity to the idea of skillful and unskillful gets more and more refined, you find yourself dropping more and more refined things. Ultimately you can drop the whole process of fabrication altogether.

But first we have to start with blatant things. This is why we start with the breath. What kind of breathing is skillful breathing? What kind of breathing is unskillful breathing? What kinds of perceptions are skillful, what kinds are unskillful? The breath and the questions about the breath are all elements in the process of fabrication. When you're talking to yourself as you meditate, what kind of talking is skillful, what kind of talking is not? The meditation points you right to this level, and asks you to drop your other levels of analyzing, other levels of looking at experience, because looking at the process of fabrication *as it's happening* is where you're going to see what you really need to see. What is the cause, what is the effect? Which causes are better than other causes? Which effects are better than other effects?

This is why the Buddha's most important teachings are the four noble truths, because they point to cause and effect: skillful cause and unskillful cause, desirable effect and undesirable effect. Simple, very basic, basic terms: pleasure, pain, ease and stress, happiness and suffering. These are things we've known since even before we could verbalize anything, but we haven't understood them. So the Buddha is trying to get you to pull the mind down to that pre-verbal level as much as you can. That becomes your basis for looking at things, for mastering the processes of breathing, thinking, and perceiving, so that you can put these processes to the ideal purpose, which is finally to go beyond all of them.

So try to get to this basic level where you're just looking at the building blocks: the very basic, basic actions that then get constructed into larger and larger patterns as you're looking at your breath, as you're going out and functioning in the world. When you don't have any other duties, you can simply watch the process of how the eye and forms meet, and then the way you comment on them, the way you direct your eyes to look at certain things in certain ways. That's a process too. You want to be able to shift in and out of that mode, because if you work in this mode all day long you wouldn't be able to function at work, wouldn't be able to get along with people.

But if you're good at shifting in and out of these modes, dealing on the level

of people when you need to, dealing on the level of the building blocks when you have the opportunity, you learn a lot of interesting lessons about how the mind works: where the elements that lead to unskillfulness—lack of mindfulness, lack of discernment, lack of concentration—come in. You begin to catch them. It's like learning another language. You don't forget your original language, it's just that you learn how to function on another level, in a new context. And people who become bilingual begin to notice that they have a separate personality in the other language, a separate sense of how the world works in the other language. The process of becoming skilled in the other language is very good lesson in learning how to take things apart in a new way, seeing processes as they happen. Then you turn around and you have a new perspective on your original language as well.

So we're training the mind here to be multilingual, able to function in many different contexts, and in particular getting good at this context of simply looking at the processes without worrying about what entities do or don't lie behind them, or about which part of the process is you and which part is not. The question here is which activities are skillful and which ones are unskillful. Learn to look at things as activities, as events in a causal chain.

And this is not just a game of perception, because it has a really good purpose: release, total freedom. That's what you can gain as you learn to look at things simply from the perspective of what leads to what, which actions lead to which results. That way you learn to see things that you never before really thought of as actions, simply as actions, as part of a causal chain.

That's one of the things that the Buddha means by the word, "emptiness." You don't load this causal chain down with your preconceived notions or the constructs you tend to build around it. Instead, you learn how to see events simply as that: as events, empty of any other questions that would pull you off in other directions.

The Meaning of the Body

October 15, 2004

Everything in life is fabricated. It's all put together. And it doesn't just fall together on its own. A lot of effort goes into putting things together. And because we have to put so much effort into life, we want to make sure that our effort is well directed, our energy is well spent. Otherwise you can waste whole lifetimes of a lot of effort, a lot of hard, hard work, and have nothing really to show for it.

As the Buddha pointed out, the best use of our efforts is to find those spots where the whole fabricated system opens out to something unfabricated. Everything else that's fabricated he said to look at as means. Even our intermediate goals along the path are means to a further end, so we have to learn to look at them just as that, as means. Even our relations with other people should be regarded as means to this higher end.

Now, this would sound selfish and calculating if it weren't for the fact that our goal is one that gives no harm to anyone at all. Look at those reflections on the four requisites. Just the fact that you're born with a body means that you're a big consumer of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. So one of the kindest things you can do for anyone is to get yourself out of the system. Think of all the suffering that goes into keeping you fed and clothed and sheltered and making sure your health stays good—all the work from the plants on up: the people who have to grow the plants, the people who have to buy the plants, transport the plants that so you have food to eat. Someone once traced a sweatshirt from Uzbeki cotton, through Iranian mills and South Korean factories, and finally showing up in a Gap warehouse in Kentucky. And that's just clothing. It goes all over the world a couple of times before it gets to you, just to meet your need for protection against the elements. The fact that you have this body means that you're constantly consuming and that a lot of work goes into meeting the body's needs.

So the issue is how to get the best use out of the body, because someday you're going to have to throw it away. If you don't let go of it nicely, it's going to push you out, and before you go you'll probably have to put up with disease and all the other problems that come as you begin to lose your grip: This part of the body stops functioning, that part stops functioning, you grow incontinent.... So you want to learn how to look at the body not as an end in and of itself but as a means, as a tool in the practice leading to a happiness beyond the body.

If you expect too much happiness simply from having a body, you're making unrealistic demands on it. It's the same with relationships. If you're expecting a relationship to provide you with all the happiness you want in the world, it's going to be a difficult relationship. Often, subconsciously, that's the kind of relationship we have with our own bodies. So learn how to look at the body in its true nature so that you're not surprised when it grows ill and does funny things as it grows ill.

Once, when I was in Thailand, I was one of a group of monks visiting a man in the hospital. He had developed liver cancer and didn't know how much longer he was going to live, so he wanted to make some merit. That's why we went. Unusually for his generation in Thailand, he'd been a fitness freak and had been very proud all the way up through his fifties that he'd stayed slim and trim while all of his friends had gotten paunchy. We talked about how he should meditate, but he kept complaining about how ashamed he was that his stomach had bloated up from the liver cancer and that he was no longer in good shape. He couldn't focus his mind on the breath, all because he had developed unrealistic expectations about the body's potential for health. But if you learn to expect that the body's going to grow diseased no matter how well you care for it, disease is not such a shock or a problem when it actually comes.

This is one of the reasons for that contemplation on the 32 parts of the body—to realize there's the potential for all kinds of stuff to happen in the body, to realize that that's the body's nature. As long as you latch onto it as yours and develop pride around it, if you look at its health as a goal in and of itself—whether through exercise or natural foods or whatever else—you're setting yourself up for a problem. But if you see it simply as a means to a higher end, you're in a lot better shape.

So when you find the mind growing concerned about the body—and many times it's amazing, as your life gets more and more simplified as a meditator, how you can get more and more obsessed with the body, making sure that it's healthy, making sure it's getting the right food and medicines—you have to develop a sense of proportion around those issues so that you can focus on using the body for other things. After all, it's one of the foundations of mindfulness, one of the frames of reference. You have to learn how to be on friendly terms with it. It's funny: We contemplate, "Filled with all sorts of unclean things," and at the same time, "Be friends with the body." But that's an important part of being friends with people: being very clear about their shortcomings so you don't demand too much out of them, and at the same time gaining a clear sense of where their strengths actually lie.

And the body *does* have a lot of strengths. It's a good place to stay. As long as you're alive you can take it as a frame of reference. As the Buddha said, it's one

of the ways of creating an island for yourself. As he was about to die, he told his monks, "You can't depend on the Buddha. You can't depend on the person of the Tathagatha, because like every other person his body is going to have to go." So he reminded all of his followers to make themselves an island. He said, "How do you do that? Take the body in and of itself as your frame of reference, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with regard to the world." That's one of the four ways of creating your island. In other words, you take the body just as it is, as you're immediately experiencing it. And one way of doing that is to stay with the breath coming in, going out, being with the sensation of the breath.

Or you can analyze the 32 parts of the body. Or the elements of the body: the warmth, which is the fire element; the motion in the body, which is the wind element; the cool and liquid sensations, the water element; and the solid and heavy ones, the earth element. Try to bring them into a balance, as a way of keeping yourself anchored in the present moment.

One of the reasons we do this is because there are not that many narratives around these things. The breath has one narrative: It's in and it's out, it's comfortable and it's not. That's it. Not much of a narrative. And it's a great dissolver for the narratives the mind spins for itself.

Once the mind spins its narratives, it snares itself, like a spider caught in its own web. Someone once said that the universe isn't made out of atoms, it's made out of stories. That may not be true of the physical universe, but the universe of our lives is certainly made out of stories, and often they're oppressive stories, stories that create a lot of suffering for ourselves and for the people around us. And yet we allow ourselves to get caught up in them.

A good way to cut through those narratives is just to stay with the sensation of the body in and of itself here in the present moment. This helps get you out of the narratives so that you can realize how unreal they are. At the same time, you see all the effort that goes into those narratives. And what do you get out of them? A lot of times it's suffering. Some narratives are useful, but the important point of this practice is that you put yourself in a position where you can choose which narratives you're going to get involved with and which ones you're not. Otherwise you're subject to everything the mind spins out.

So whatever way you have of making yourself comfortable with the sensation of the body in the present—working with the breath, working with other parts of the body, working with the elements—regard that as your island, as your safe haven outside of the narratives. That way the mind has a foundation. Once it has a foundation, it's not knocked over by things. Events in the world can go past you, they can go through you, as long as you're not latching onto things.

The sense of the body can provide a larger context for all your experiences of the world. Once you have this sense of being here in your foundation, then the experiences of the world are just sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations, all contained within this context of the body. This is not to deny that they have reality, but look, for instance, at your experience of color: How do you know that the sky is actually blue out there the way you see it? What's "blue" about the frequency of the light waves scattered by the molecules in the air? The "blue" is all in your brain's reactions to the impulses sent in by the eyes, that's all. It's something experienced in the context of the body. All the objects of the senses are experienced here in the context of the body. When you realize that, it helps make this context a lot stronger; the foundation gets more deeply set. It's more all-encompassing, less likely to get knocked over by things.

So the body is good grounding for concentration practice. It's also a good object for insight practice, developing insight into the whole issue of which actions are skillful, which ones are not; which mental qualities lead to suffering, which mental qualities lead to the end of suffering; which assumptions pile on suffering, which assumptions are part of the path. The word "*sañña*" has as one of its meanings "assumptions," the way you label things.

For example, there's the way you label pain. Some of the ways you label it cause it to build up, make it more and more of an issue. Or you can label it in other ways that cut through the issues. One way of dealing with pain—once the mind settles down and can actually look at pain and not feel threatened by it—is to ferret out, when you have a feeling of pain, exactly which sensations are the pain sensations and which sensations are the body sensations—again, the four elements: solidity, warmth, coolness, movement.

We tend to glom the whole thing together, but when you start taking it apart and seeing it as specific, separate sensations, you begin to see how fleeting pain is, just like pleasure. The actual sensations of the body are more lasting, and the pain sensations come and go, come and go, come and go, sometimes in very quick succession. Even in a part of the body that seems to be nothing but a mass of pain, you can start ferreting out the different sensations to see which sensation precisely is the pain there and which are other sensations—heat, solidity—that have somehow gotten glued to the pain by your labeling. If you label them in a different way, they get unglued. Instead of your hip or your back or your leg being a whole mass of pain, you realize there are just these fleeting sensations of pain together with other fleeting sensations. This makes pain a lot less threatening. It also shows you the power of your perceptions, that what you thought was a given was actually something you had glued together yourself. This makes you want to turn around and look at the whole process of labeling things in the mind in other areas as well.

So in all these cases you're using the body as an aid in the practice, which is aimed at pursuit of true happiness. If you're looking at the body as a goal in and of itself, it's going to disappoint you—*big time*—but if you learn to use it as a tool, the happiness that results as you use it wisely gets more and more solid, more and more secure. As you get more self-reliant in this way, you lean less on other people. Your efforts produce more happiness both for yourself and for the people around you because you spend less time weighing everyone down with your unnecessary burdens.

So developing a balanced attitude toward the body is a very important part of the practice. And to develop that balance we have different tools: Some tend to emphasize the shortcomings of the body; others, the importance of the body. Instead of saying that you like some tools and don't like other tools, remember that all the tools have their function, they all have their time and their place. The more tools you master, the better off you are because you have tools for any situation—whatever comes up.

Pleasure & Pain

April 15, 2005

Pleasure and pain are big issues in our lives—so big that you'd think we would understand them better. It's because we let ourselves get pushed around by these things without really looking into them: That's why we suffer so much. And one of the reasons we don't look into them is because it's hard. Pain especially is hard to look at. We've been dealing with pleasure and pain ever since we were born, and a lot of our habits for dealing with pleasure and pain are things we learned before we could even talk, before we could understand anything at all. So there's a lot of ignorance here that we haven't explored. Meditating is basically making up our minds to try and understand these two issues—which are basically one issue: the issue of feeling.

We start out by establishing a beachhead for ourselves. In the midst of all the chaos of the world, we have our little corner here. That's what Ajaan Suwat liked to call the monastery here: our "quiet corner." You have to make a quiet corner in the mind as well. If you wait for the world to settle down and be a good place to live in, where everybody's fair and just, you'll never have your chance to straighten out your own mind. You'll die first. This is why you have to start here, creating this little corner and giving all your attention to this one spot where you're focusing on the breath or whatever your meditation object is. The purpose is to create a little space, at least, where you can put aside the madness of the world—where you feel solid, secure, where there's a sense of wellbeing.

So you find a spot that's relatively comfortable and you work to make it more comfortable. You learn how to recognize when the breath is too long or too short—because it doesn't *feel* right. Nobody out there can tell you that this kind of breathing is too long or that this kind of breathing is too short, too shallow, too deep, or whatever. You've got to notice these things on your own. Learn how to be sensitive just to this process of breathing and figure out for yourself: What is the sign of a breath that's too long or too short? You've got to develop your own sensitivities.

This is what insight is all about: developing your inner sensitivity to pleasure and pain, so that you can detect them on their subtlest levels. If you wait until they're really strong, you get overwhelmed. So start on this subtle level here: just the breathing. Then when you've got a spot here that feels good—the breath comes in, it feels good; the breath goes out, it feels good—you can let the sense of boundary around your little spot dissolve away. Think of the sense of ease

spreading out from that spot, flowing along whatever channels there are in the body that pleasure can flow, permeating in all directions.

Again, this is up to you to decide what works in your sense of the body. Teachers can give pointers, but you've got to take the pointers and put them into practice and see what works and what doesn't work for you. It's a matter of developing the right sensitivity. You can't take someone else's insights and just slap them onto your experience and claim to have wisdom. Discernment comes in three forms: the discernment you learn from other people—the things you hear, the things you read—that's one level; the things you think through—that's another level; and then finally the things you learn by trying to develop mindfulness, alertness, and other good qualities of the mind. The third level is where the insight really becomes your own—it's your own sensitivity showing you these things.

Once you've developed your beachhead, your quiet corner, work out from there. See how it relates to other things going on in the body—particularly other feelings of pleasure, other feelings of pain. Some kinds of pain you can work through. As you expand the sense of the comfortable breath, it begins to dissolve the pain away. Or if there's a sense of tension around the pain, you can dissolve the tension away. Even though the pain may stay there, dissolving the tension around it can help a lot. It makes it a lot easier to live with these things.

So get as much of the body as comfortable as you can. That's when you can really look into the pains still remaining, because you've got your foundation, and you've been developing sensitivity. You can begin to see which part of the pain is physical and which is mental—in other words, which part of the pain comes from actions of the mind, the way the mind reacts to the raw data of physical pain, the way it puts a label on it, the way it constructs dialogues around it. All the wild beasts in your savannah here are going to come gathering around the waterhole of the pain. That little child who is always feeling wronged, the little child who feels—whatever: You find that when you get in touch with your inner child it whines a lot. And especially here, right at the pain. If you can learn not to identify with it, you learn a lot of interesting things. You sense how when *this* particular thought comes and surrounds the pain, it makes the pain worse. *This* particular thought makes it better. You see these things through your own sensitivity, by having a place to stand and watch where you're not totally threatened by the pain.

At the same time, you learn how to deal with pleasure. It's so easy, when there's a sense of pleasure in the body, just to drop the breath and forget about your meditation and to indulge in the pleasure. That's something you also have to work to overcome. It's not that you want to destroy the pleasure, it's just that you learn how to be with it, how to use it and not get sucked in by it. In other

words, you learn how to change your relationship both to pleasure and to pain. If you approach pleasure the right way, you can use it as a foundation for stronger and stronger powers of concentration and more and more stillness. The greater the stillness, the more sensitivity you can bring to discerning pleasure and the pain.

So in both cases you're trying to learn how to deal with pleasure and pain and not be overwhelmed by them, to watch how your mind reacts in unskillful ways to them, so you can begin to unlearn a lot of the bad habits you developed way back when. As you learn how to approach both pleasure and pain in more skillful ways—as tools on the path, rather than ends in themselves—you find that your new understanding has an impact on the entirety of your life, because so much of your life is driven by pleasure and pain. When you can see them both more clearly—and your reactions to them more clearly—you're not driven. You have a wider range of choice. More freedom. And it all starts right here, at the basic building blocks.

The physical world may be made out of atoms, but the world of your experience is made out of little things like this—pleasures and pains. So use the techniques of the meditation to become more skillful in how you deal with the basic building blocks. Once the basic building blocks are well in hand, then the whole rest of your life gets rebuilt.

Investing Your Happiness

August 3, 2004

One of the purposes of meditation is to sensitize yourself to the fact that you're not simply a passive observer of what's going on. Life isn't a television show that you simply sit and watch. It's an interactive video game. You're actively creating the characters, designing the plot, in addition to watching it.

The Buddha's teachings on *sankhara*, fabrication, point to this fact. He defines fabrication as intentional acts. There is an element of intention in all your experience. Everything you sense, whether in the physical world or the mental world, has an element of intention. That's what makes it an experience. Without that intention you wouldn't experience anything. Because our intentions aim at happiness, what we're living with right now is the result of our attempts at happiness, pleasure, wellbeing. That's a sobering thought. You look at what you're experiencing and some of it's happy and some of it's not. And to think that this is the result of every act you've done to achieve happiness: It gives you pause.

When you think in this way, you begin to see the areas where you've fallen short. But at the same time you can focus on the areas where you've had some success. After all, if you hadn't had some success, you wouldn't be here meditating. You wouldn't be a human being. You'd be prowling around as a common animal, a hungry ghost, a prisoner of hell. So when you practice concentration, the Buddha has you focus on the sense of wellbeing you've already got here. What you need to do is to learn how to maximize that wellbeing—because one of the reasons we're so careless in the way we approach happiness is that we get serious about it only when there's a lot of pain. We focus on the pain. We've got to fix it. And there's a sense of desperation about trying to fix our pain, fix our sufferings. Yet when things get easy, we get lazy. Complacent. All we want to do is just wallow in that sense of wellbeing. And of course wallowing in it is not a cause for more happiness. It just eats up what we already have.

So the trick is to learn how to develop a sense of wellbeing and then not to be heedless—to see what further good we can get out of that wellbeing. Ajaan Lee gives an example. He says it's like having a tree that gives coconuts. If you want, you can eat up all the coconuts, but that's all you get—a stomach full of coconuts, and soon you're hungry again. But if you take some of the coconuts and plant them, you get more trees and then more trees because you're willing to take

what you've got and invest some of it. In the same way, when you meditate, you take what sense of wellbeing you have and invest some of it in creating more wellbeing.

So you start by focusing on where the breath feels good coming in, feels good going out. If you can't get a good sense of ease with the breath, start with thoughts of goodwill. Wish goodwill for yourself, goodwill for other beings. That's a comfortable thought because it's not fighting with the wishes of any being anywhere. Everybody wants to be happy. So you wish them happiness. And then from that sense of harmonious wellbeing, you focus on the breath.

There should be at least some spot in the body where the breath feels good. Look for it, and then keep watch over it in such a way that you don't spoil it. Sometimes when you focus on the body you tense up around the part where you're focusing. That makes it tight, uncomfortable. Part of this comes from envisioning the body as something very solid. Remember that what you're experiencing here is an energy field, the energy flowing through the body. Some parts of the energy field may seem to feel more solid than others, but if you think about the whole thing as the flowing of an energy field, then if there are areas where it seems blocked or squeezed, you can think of opening up a new channel so that the energy easily flows in, flows out, without your having to pull it or push it or exert any pressure on it at all. It comes in, comes out on its own. All you have to do is keep tabs on it. Allow it to be comfortable. Think of it that way: Instead of *making* it comfortable, you're going to *allow* it to be comfortable. And then allow it to stay that way.

Don't interfere with it. Don't mess with it. In other words, as long as you're going to be shaping the present moment, try to be sensitive to how you're doing it. If things are going well, don't mess them up. Be alert to what you're doing, because every action, as the Buddha said, aims at happiness. Be alert to that. What you're experiencing has an element of your intention for happiness built into it. Be sensitive to that and also to whether it's working or not. If it's not working, you can change. Change the way you breathe, change the way you focus, change the way you conceive of your experience of the present, the experience of the body sitting here right now. Allow for some more possibilities. This is what a lot of the meditation opens up: seeing the possibilities of what can be done with the present moment. For example, a thought comes into the mind. Our tendency is then to just jump with the thought, and go into the thought-world, and ride with it wherever it goes. Or in other words, we get taken wherever it's going to take us.

But if you're really observant, you begin to notice that it's possible for a thought to arise without your going with it. It doesn't have to pull you away from the breath. After all, the breath is still here, going in, going out. If thoughts

destroyed our breathing, we would have died a long time ago. Thoughts come in, thoughts go out, and the breath is still there. And there's a part of your awareness in touch with that. We tend to block that awareness out so we can get into the thought, but the trick here is to allow it to stay open so that when a thought comes it doesn't pull you away the way it used to. That possibility you may not have noticed before. And as you meditate you find other possibilities as well.

We're experimenting with the potential for finding happiness, so always keep that experimental attitude in mind. What *is* experiment except for the belief that maybe not everything is already known? Maybe some of the knowledge that has been passed on from other people, or that we've cooked up ourselves, isn't right.

Someone once defined science as the belief that the experts can be wrong. Meditation serves the same function, allowing you to question the things you thought you knew for sure. They may be wrong. Check that out. You've got the breath and the mind here in the present moment as your laboratory, so work on these things to create a more stable, more satisfying sense of pleasure right here and now. Even though this pleasure is fabricated, it's part of the path. It's the pleasure part of the path.

People often complain about how the four noble truths focus on suffering, but if you look at them carefully you see that the most important of them is the fourth truth, the path to the end of suffering. It's the first one the Buddha taught. It's the one truth that contains all four noble truths right there in Right View. At its heart, though, is Right Concentration. If you look at the definition of Right Concentration, that's where you find the pleasure. The first jhana starts out with a sense of rapture and ease, or rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. In other words, you pull the mind away from its outside objects, outside distractions, and just stay right here. Then as you create a greater sense of pleasure, a greater sense of ease in the present moment, that's the heart of the path. It's something you develop. So we're here trying to maximize the pleasure we've got, not simply to bliss out—although it's nice to be able to bliss out—but also to be alert, to be mindful, to still have a sense of heedfulness.

What's the use of this bliss? That's the next step. When you have this sense of pleasure born from seclusion, you can see things more clearly—if you handle the pleasure right, if your attitude toward the pleasure is right. When the mind has a sense of ease and wellbeing, you can look at your attachments, you can look at all of the other mistakes you've been making, with a much greater sense of fairness, a much greater sense of objectivity, with less sense of being desperate. It's like the difference between people who have to worry about where tomorrow's meal coming from as opposed to those who don't have to worry about that at all. When you don't have to worry about your next meal, you have a lot more time to

think about things, to look at things, to ponder them objectively.

So when we meditate, we're developing a skill that gives us a sense of ease right now that we can begin to trust, that we can tap into again and again and again. We don't have to worry about where our next hit of happiness is going to come from. That changes the way the mind approaches its experiences, its pleasures and pains. It becomes a lot less desperate. Of course there's always the danger of complacency when you figure you can tap into the breath at any time, but if you can overcome that complacency, you begin to realize that this is an extremely useful state of mind—a very skillful way of approaching happiness, and a very skillful way of providing a foundation for yourself so that you can find greater happiness.

As the Buddha said, the noble path is fabricated. It's the highest fabrication of all. So when we know it's fabricated, we should do it mindfully, with a sense of alertness to what we're doing and to the results we're getting. This is what makes it a skill. And we see the results not only in the immediate present, but also over time.

As I said earlier, what we're living with is the results of our attempts at happiness. And as we practice, we find that the results get better and better because we're clearer and clearer about what we're doing. All of the Buddha's teachings are meant to help us in this quest for a true happiness, the ultimate happiness, nibbana. That's where they're all aimed. It's a happiness that isn't fabricated, but the only way you can get there, the only way you can get beyond fabrication, is to learn how to fabricate well.

Things as They've Come to Be

August 29, 2005

Sometimes at the end of suttas, when the Buddha has been teaching the monks, he concludes by telling them to go meditate. Actually, what he says is to go do jhana, because that's the kind of meditation he taught. Some people think that jhana is only one of two types of meditation he taught, that he also taught vipassana, but there's never any passage where he tells anybody to go do vipassana. It's always, "Go do jhana." This is because he saw jhana as a practice where you develop both tranquility and insight together. In other words, you need to develop tranquility and insight just to get into jhana to begin with, to get into good states of concentration. Then when you've developed that concentration, you can use it to develop qualities of tranquility and insight even further.

So try not to see the two qualities as separate. When you're steadying the mind, you've got to have some understanding of what you're doing. After all, the first jhana involves directed thought and evaluation, which are called *sankharas*—verbal sankharas—and sankharas are the topics of insight. When you direct your thoughts to the breath and then evaluate the breath, this is how you settle down. The more precisely you evaluate the breath, the more sensitive you are to the breath sensations in the body, then the more you can make them a comfortable place to be. And in the course of doing that, you learn things both about the breath and about the mind: what kind of sensations the mind likes, what kinds it doesn't like; how the mind affects the breath, how the breath affects the mind. Right there is a lot of raw material for insight.

But in the beginning your purpose is more to settle the mind. This is the tranquility side of meditation practice, finding the sensations that are easiest to stay with and learning how to maximize those sensations so that you can develop a oneness of mind around them. "Oneness" here means not only being steadily with one object, but also allowing the object to fill your awareness, so that it's the one thing you're aware of. When you focus on breathing, it's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's a sensation of energy that flows through the whole body, and you're sitting in the middle of this vast breathing process that affects every nerve, every muscle. The whole experience of your body is related to the breath. The more you can perceive the breath in that way, the easier it is to settle down. And the easier it is to *stay* settled down, working on what the Buddha calls the enlarged mind—*mahaggatam cittam*—an awareness

that's all around. That kind of awareness is what allows you to see things for what they are. It's the foundation for the vipassana side of jhana practice. In other words, the Buddha doesn't say to stop doing jhana in order to start doing vipassana. He just says to learn how to look at the jhana in a different way, as a process of fabrication, how it's put together.

We often think that vipassana means seeing things as they are, the idea being that there's something already out there—things as they are—and they're all covered over by our preconceived notions, our mental fabrications. What we've got to do is clear those fabrications away and that will leave just the pristine things as they are. But that's not really how insight works. That understanding actually gets in the way of insight's arising because the Buddha didn't say, "things as they are." He said, "things as they've come to be": how they've come into being. That's a process of fabrication. It's not the case that fabrications lie on top of pristine things as they are. Fabrication is how those things have come into being in the first place.

So once the mind is settled down you want to look at the fabricating that goes on in the mind to see how the things you experience contain a very large element of fabrication. The fabrication is your intentional input: That's what the Buddha wants you to see. You might think that if only you could get rid of your fabrication you would see the pristine things as they are, but if you take away the fabrication the things are no longer there. Your experience of the world is a process of fabrication; to gain insight you have to see that fabrication in action. And the best place to see it in action is when the mind is really still, when you're fabricating a state of stillness in the mind.

To get really familiar with the fabrication process, you have to keep doing it with as much skill as you can. It's like learning about eggs. You could sit and look at an egg for days, but what would you know about it? Not very much, for all you can see is the shell. But what if you can crack it open? You see what's inside. And then you can take what's inside and make it into different things. You can make it into scrambled eggs, fried eggs, omelets, soufflés. And the more skilled you are at making different egg dishes, the more you understand eggs: how they react to different kinds of heat, what they do when you put them over low heat, what they do when you put them over high heat, what they do when you mix them with different ingredients. The more you work with the eggs in this way, the more you understand them.

It's the same with the mind. If you really want to understand the fabrication of the mind, make it into a nice soufflé. In other words, very purposefully fabricate something really good with your mind, like a nice state of concentration with a nice comfortable breath. And in doing so, you learn a lot more about the

mind than you would simply looking at it without any knowledge of cause and effect. You've got to manipulate it to see how cause and effect are operating.

That's when you understand the process of fabrication. You get the mind really still and try to develop an all-around awareness. Then you protect that awareness. That's when you start seeing fabrication in action. As you try to maintain your concentration, what destroys it? At first we think that it's destroyed by things coming in from the outside, but that's not the case. A lot of the inside fabrication comes bubbling up to destroy it as well. Sounds don't destroy your concentration, it's your *reaction* to sounds. What other people do doesn't destroy your concentration, it's what *you* do. As Ajaan Chaa says, sounds don't disturb you, you disturb the sounds.

If you want to really see this clearly, the best place to see it is in the mind with this all-around awareness. Don't leave this awareness. If you leave jhana in order to gain insight, you've lost your foundation and you just thrash around. And the mind can get very anxious, very alienated, very threatened by the insights you try to push on it, because it realizes it doesn't have a foundation.

So stay in your foundation and look to see what's going to arise there. Like a spider on a web: You want to be sensitive to the whole body in the same way that the spider is sensitive to the whole web. The best way to do that is to have all the different strands connected. That's why we work on connecting all the comfortable sensations in the body so that they form a network, a network of heightened sensitivity inside. Then all you have to do is stay in touch with the network. As soon as anything comes up—maybe a little stirring here and there on the boundary line between the body and mind—you sense it through the network. As soon as you sense it, you can zap it. A little stirring forms and you can tease it out, un-form it, zap it. If you're not quick to zap it, the mind will identify it as a thought about this or that, and then you create a whole thought-world based on the way you labeled the stirring.

The best way to see the stages in how that happens is to try to stop them as soon as you notice them and dissolve the thought away. You may find that a part of the mind gets frustrated when you zap things in this way. It wants to continue weaving those thoughts, exploring those thought-worlds. If you want to understand that compulsion to keep creating these thought-worlds, one of the best ways is to thwart it. Keep saying, "Nope, nope, nope." As soon as there's the slightest little bit of recognition that this is a thought about that, that's a thought about this, dissolve it—no matter what the thought may seem to be—and see which part of the mind starts screaming. That's how you start understanding the will, the intentional element, behind the fabrication. Once you understand it, you can dismantle it bit by bit by bit. This way you get more and more sensitive to

the parts of the mind that you use to keep hidden from yourself. As you bring them out into the open, that's where insight can do its work.

These things don't come out of their lair unless you stand in the entrance, to keep their food from coming in. Or it's like people who live in underground strongholds who like to pull the strings: They won't come out unless they feel frustrated because they can't pull the strings anymore, so you have to step on their strings.

This is how you ultimately come to understand the whole process of fabrication. And where do you look for it? Wherever there's stress. Ajaan Suwat used to mention this often: Look at where there's stress, and that's where you'll see fabrication; where you see fabrication is where you see the ignorance that's been causing you to suffer. As you bring more and more of that ignorance out into the open, there comes a point where it just stops—because you see even the slightest little things that would cause stress. In seeing these things, you replace the ignorance with knowledge. All of the background commentating that goes on in the mind and is trying to direct everything starts coming more and more to the fore. When you see it clearly, you can allow it to stop. And that's when you come to see something unfabricated, where the stress really ends. You don't have to go out of concentration in order to see it. You take the concentration apart from within.

So this is why, when you're trying to gain insight and you're feeling strung out and anxious, it's a sign you've lost your foundation. You're looking in the wrong place. Get the mind into a good state of concentration, have it all-around aware, and then start looking at the process of fabrication as it appears from this viewpoint. You don't have to go anywhere else.

Someone once asked me how I dealt with people who found the experience of Awakening to be disorienting. That's about as wrongheaded a question as you can get. Awakening is very orienting—the most orienting thing in life. It shows you that there's something a lot more solid and reliable than you'd ever imagined before. It shows you something deathless and totally free from suffering. And where do you look for it? You look right here: right where the mind is settled and still. Then you learn to see that settled stillness as a process of fabrication, and you start taking it apart right where it's happening. You don't have to go anywhere else.

Fabricating the Present

August 20, 2004

Bring the mind to the breath, for this is where everything important is happening. You want to be as still as possible so that you can catch sight of all these important things happening, because most often we don't see that there's anything important here. The breath goes in, goes out. That's all we see, we've got other business to do, so we let it go on automatic pilot. As a result, we miss a lot of the things that are going on. But when we meditate, we stop to take time to look at this process.

Ajaan Lee once made the comment that when you have the mind with the breath you've got all four of the foundations of mindfulness right here, all four of the potential frames of reference that you can use in your practice. There's body, feelings, mind-states, and the mental qualities that are either helping or hindering you in seeing what's going on. It's all here. If you want to see the relationships among these things, you watch right here. You don't watch anywhere else.

What are you watching for? Well, you want to see the how the mind shapes things. Ajaan Suwat once made the comment that if you're looking for ignorance, you don't have to look very far. Just look at the fabrications of the mind. The principle of dependent co-arising says that fabrications are conditioned by ignorance. So if you're wondering where this ignorance is that we're trying to track down, it's right here where the mind is fashioning things—fashioning bodily sensations and mental events. From fabrication comes consciousness, and consciousness leads to name and form: physical and mental phenomena.

It's worth thinking about: Fabrication, this process of making, comes before phenomena themselves. We hear so often how people shape their reality, how our perceptions tend to filter the ways we see reality, and yet we don't see it as it's actually happening, even though it happens very directly right here. Even in your own sense of the body there are lots of different sensations coming in, through the various nerve ends. The mind has its habits for selecting among these sensations to present itself with a picture of what's going on. Sometimes the physical sensations get mixed up with the mental sensations, for lots of mental information is coming in at the same time. And so we select things, block some things out, highlight others, to create the story of our mind, our sense of what's going on in here.

And there's ignorance underlying it all. What we're trying to do here is to replace that ignorance with clear knowing. This is why we bring the mind to the present moment: so we can watch this process as it happens. Bring it right to that frontier where the body and the mind meet, where mental and physical phenomena meet: the mind watching the breath. It's right here that you can see the process of fabrication really clearly, if you look. But first, you've got to create the conditions for it to be clear. This is why we practice concentration. We've got to get the mind still and engaged in mastering a skill: the skill of being still. That's when it's easiest to see the mind, when the mind is clearest: when it's aware of what it's doing and of what the results are. Even if it's not doing anything at all, you want to be aware of the fact that it's not doing anything and aware of the results of not doing anything.

People often talk about how, when they're practicing a skill, if they get really good at it, there come times when they get into what they call the zone, where everything seems automatic and even the slightest things become apparent—where they're one with the baseball, or one with the bat, or one with the basketball. In the same way, when you meditate you want to get one with the breath. Try to get fluent in the breath. Try to get on good terms, be comfortable, be familiar with the breath, so that there comes a point where it seems like your awareness and the breath become one. Only when we allow them to be one and to stay that way will they actually begin to separate out naturally through the process of fabrication. You can see it clearly as it happens.

This is why we work so much with the breath: One, the mind working with the breath puts itself in a good position to observe itself. Two, by working with the breath, things get calmed down. It's a lot easier to see events in the mind when the breath is very still than when the breath is moving all over the place. That's why step number four in breath meditation, after you're aware of the whole body, is to allow what they call bodily fabrication to calm down. "Bodily fabrication" means the in-and-out breath. You allow the breath to calm down. Try to be sensitive to whatever mechanical ways you have of breathing, or to any un-thought-out ideas of what the breath should be. Often those ideas will keep you pumping and pumping and pumping, even when the body's full of breath energy and doesn't need much more. It can get by with very little in-and-out breathing.

Ajaan Fuang's analogy is of a big water jar—you see these all over Thailand, enormous jars for catching rainwater running off house roofs. As he says, there comes a point when the jar is full, and no matter how much more it rains you can't put any more water in the jar. The same with the breath energy in the body: There comes a point where it's full. You're sitting here and the breath energy seems perfectly capable of just being there, without pumping much in, pumping

much out—just an energy-exchange around the edges. Try to be aware of that: the sensation of energy at your skin. If you feel any tightness in your skin anywhere, think of its opening up all around you. That allows all those little muscles in the pores to open up a bit, and that in turn allows the breath energy to come in. As the mind settles down and is still in the midst of all this, you need less and less and less oxygen. It's not that you're stifling the breath or forcing it to stop. You're just getting more and more sensitive to how heavy or long the breathing has to be. After a while you find that it naturally gets lighter and shorter, if you're paying attention. There may be longer and longer gaps between an in-breath and an out-breath—that's perfectly fine—until everything gets still. There may be a little bit of breathing in and out right at the surface. Ajaan Lee's analogy is of the vapor coming off of an ice cube. But otherwise what you've got here seems to be a big energy field. And it's hard to say whether it's a physical energy field or a mental energy field. It's just an energy field—energetic, but still.

Learn to stay there for a good long while because this is where the interesting things happen. This is also where you get the energy you need. When you've got the energy flowing around, everything is connected. This gives you strength, gives your meditation strength. It gives you the range in which you can watch the process of fabrication. Little things seem to stir here, stir there. Sometimes they don't amount to anything. Sometimes they catch hold and turn into thoughts. Or else they turn into major physical sensations. It depends on which way you interpret them, how you read them.

Just this in itself allows you to see how much the mind shapes things. But for the time being you don't want to follow these things. You want to get good at zapping them. In other words, where there's a slight complication in the energy field, just comb it out. Open it up so that it doesn't tighten up into something. Get good at that again and again and again.

Like those cartoon frogs with very long tongues: They sit there and a fly comes by, and no matter which direction the fly comes from, zap, they get the fly and then the tongue goes back into the mouth. In other words, your center is right here, wherever you have a sense of being centered in the body. And then your awareness goes out to zap any of those little fabrications as they come. Then you return to your center. Why do you do this? So that you can get clearer and clearer about how the process of fabrication begins. Where are those points when the mind begins to label things? "Ah—this is a thought of the future; this is a thought of the past. This is your arm. This is your leg. This is warmth. This is coolness. This is energy. This is solidity." The mind can choose these things—choose what to focus on, how to label it. And once it chooses to give a particular interpretation, it will find all sorts of evidence elsewhere in that range of your awareness to support it, to provide the context for whatever that perception was.

If you get hoodwinked into those little worlds, you can't see what they're doing because all of a sudden you've got a different context.

So instead, you want to maintain this context of a broad awareness, at the borderline between what's physical and mental. As you get more and more used to being here, you start seeing a lot of interesting things about the processes of the mind. Those are the processes we want to understand: the fabrication, the sankharas the Buddha talks about. Unless you see very clearly how they happen, there's no way you're going to find what's unfabricated, because you keep falling into their little worlds, the little contexts they create for you. And you miss the processing itself.

It's like the difference between getting involved in the story of a TV show and watching it to see how the director manipulates things. So much of our lives is spent in these stories. It's a good idea to step back and ask—"Who's directing this?" and "How are they directing it?" and "What skill do they have?" "How do they draw you in? What's the hook?" To make another analogy, it's like learning how to write magazine articles. The editors will tell you that the first sentence, the first paragraph, needs a hook, something to draw the reader in. Otherwise the reader won't get into your context. This is how the mind works: It hooks you into a little world and takes you wherever it wants you to go.

And the raw materials are pretty meager—just this energy that begins to collect here and to clot there and turn into something. Like those little seed crystals they use to make rain. The water vapor gathers around the seed crystals and turns into raindrops. As the raindrops add up they become a rainstorm. Without the seed crystals the vapor wouldn't coalesce. These little seed crystals of fabrication form in the mind, then thoughts and other things form around them, and all of a sudden you've got a thought storm. You don't see this until you learn how to hang around this place where you're just with the field of energy: awareness energy, breath energy. It has the potential to turn into any kind of energy depending on how you interpret it. If you hang out here, you start seeing lots of interesting things, learn a lot about the mind—which is why we use the breath to bring us here. And why we continue using the breath to help us maintain this stance.

When Ajaan Fuang's students would get to this point in their meditation, he'd have them play with the elements: fire, water, earth, space, and consciousness. You begin to see that the way you sense your body depends on exactly what you focus on. The potential for all six elements is all here, throughout this range of energy. It depends on which sensations you're going to focus on, which ones you emphasize. Seeing this serves three purposes: One, it gets you really focused on the present moment. Two, it helps make you more comfortable being here. And three, you see the process of fabrication at work.

You see how you've got raw materials here in the present moment and how the element of fabrication shapes them into experiences. As a meditator you want to see this clearly again, and again, and again, so that ultimately you can detect even the most subtle of fabrications and zap those as well.

So this is why we're here: to get rid of our ignorance as to why there are fabrications going on, why our intentions are constantly shaping things. We want to see if we can find that spot where we stop fabrication—not by stomping it out or holding it in suspension, but finding the point where there's no intention. The mind gets cornered. It knows that no matter which direction it goes it's going to head toward fabrication. It's going to reap the results of fabrication, which are stressful. It sees an opening and it goes for it.

That's how this strange practice of just focusing on your breath can lead you to the end of suffering. You reach the point where you can confirm for yourself that what the Buddha taught about there being a deathless element is really true.

And that, the Buddha said, is even better than sole dominion over the entire Earth. So check and see if that's true, too.

Standing Where the Buddha Stood

January 18, 2005

In all the passages where the Buddha describes his Awakening, he talks about first going through the different levels of jhana. Once he had stabilized his mind in good, solid, strong states of concentration, he directed it to insight—which means that the insights he got were the way experience looks from the point of view of someone in good, strong concentration. That's where all the terms, all the ideas and concepts come from. So if you want to understand the ideas and concepts, you have to put yourself in the same place.

This is why we spend so much time working on concentration: to get the mind in the right spot—centered in the fourth jhana, with bright awareness filling the whole body. The in-and-out breathing at that point is still. The mind is still. Breath energy still exists in the body, but the in-and-out breathing has calmed down and stopped. And you learn to stay there.

The issues that come up in the mind while you're learning to stay there: Those are the issues that shaped the Buddha's terminology. The concepts he used, say, about fabrication: What does fabrication look like to someone in good, solid concentration? The Buddha talks about three levels of fabrication: bodily fabrication, which is the breath; verbal fabrication, which is directed thought and evaluation; and then mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. As you move the mind through the levels of jhana, directed thought and evaluation get abandoned on the second level. That's where they grow still. Then bodily fabrication, the in-and-out breath, grows still in the fourth. What you've got left at that point are feelings and perceptions. These are the big issues, because as the Buddha pointed out, feelings are the basis for craving. When the mind is there in the fourth jhana, you can see this very clearly. The perceptions are what shape your awareness of what you're experiencing. You can see this fact clearly as well.

There are other passages where the Buddha talks about the formless levels, and each of them is based on the fourth jhana. You take the same equanimity, the same mindfulness you developed in the fourth jhana and simply change the perception.

So when you want to understand feeling or perception, this is the place to do it. Get the mind really well centered, and then you can watch these things as they affect the mind. You can see where they come from, where they go. You can see their allure, you can see their drawbacks. All the things you're supposed to see are best seen right here. When you divide things up in the mind before you hit

this spot, it's like taking a knife and cutting across the grain, or cutting things up in whatever shapes you may want. You're not cutting them up from the right perspective. And so you often misapply the terms, you misunderstand what the Buddha is getting at, because you're not in the same place where he was.

It's like taking a guidebook to Paris and then landing in Rome. You look around Rome and you try to identify all of the landmarks in Paris—this is a guidebook without pictures. You see a tall tower and tell yourself, "Well, that must be the Eiffel Tower." You see Saint Peter's and tell yourself, "That must be the Cathedral of Notre Dame." But you're looking from the wrong spot.

This is why the practice of good, strong concentration lies at the heart of the path. You're putting yourself in the Buddha's place. You're standing where the Buddha stood. That way you can learn in the same way that the Buddha learned.

There's a passage in Richard Feynman where he says that the duty of every generation of scientists is to try to prove or disprove what has been handed down in the tradition. The same holds true in the practice of the Dhamma. We're here to prove or disprove what the Buddha taught. The way to do it is to follow his method. And this is his method: Get the mind centered. In the course of centering the mind, you develop good qualities: mindfulness, alertness, the ability to keep the mind with one frame of reference, without slipping off to other frames of reference. That's why mindfulness practice is such an important build-up to concentration practice.

The Buddha also says that you have to develop tranquility and powers of insight. Tranquility is developed by steadying the mind; insight, by investigating this process of fabrication. Concentration practice is a good place to see this, because you see different levels of fabrication falling away as the mind gets more and more still—and these are the important fabrications. The fact that trees and mountains are fabricated: That's their business, their issue. Our issue is the fabrications coming up in the mind: what they do to us, and what we do to them.

So you get the mind centered and start asking questions. Actually, as you've been centering it, you're already asking questions: Why is it that some days you follow a particular set of steps and they lead to one set of results, while the next day they lead to a different set of results? What did you do differently? Where will you look? Sometimes you have to look at where the mind is to begin with. And then you have to look at exactly how clearly you remember the series of steps you've followed, and how clearly you're aware of what you're doing right now, how honest are you with yourself. As the Buddha once said, that was the prerequisite for all Dhamma practice. "Give me a person who is honest," he said, "and I will teach that person the Dhamma." And he doesn't mean just being honest with the teacher. You have to be honest with yourself about what you're doing, what results you're getting.

Once the mind settles down and you're in this spot of being centered — with the breath still, with your awareness filling the body — there's a more refined level of questions to ask. This where you have to improvise. As the Buddha said, sometimes looking at things in terms of the five aggregates is what provides the important insights; sometimes you have to look in terms of the six sense spheres, sometimes in terms of dependent co-arising, sometimes in terms of the six elements. You never know beforehand which kind of analysis is going to be right for you. You have to notice, as you're meditating, which kind of analysis you feel more of an affinity for, more of a rapport with. You've got to test it. You've got to play with these things. Some people don't like the word "play," because it doesn't sound serious enough, but all intelligence comes from the ability to improvise.

If you simply do what's in the books, you're not following the Buddha's method. The Buddha didn't follow what was in books. He had to use his own powers of ingenuity. We have the advantage that we're building on the discoveries he made, but we still have to go back and make those same discoveries for ourselves. We have to use the same method he used. And one element in that method is this ability to improvise.

Again, Richard Feynman: A British physicist who went to study with Feynman in Cornell was amazed by, on the one hand, how brilliant he was in physics, but also how playful he was. After a while he realized that the two were connected. If you don't learn to play around with ideas, you don't see new things. If you don't learn to play around with what's happening in the mind, you don't make any discoveries. The Buddha was the type of person who made discoveries. You have to make yourself the type of person who makes discoveries, even if it's simply to reconfirm what he discovered. You have to go through the same process, really testing things.

Ajaan Maha Boowa would often say: "Try to prove the Buddha wrong" — because it's only when you've done your best to prove him wrong that you can be sure that you've really proved him right. Otherwise there's always a possibility that you're simply programming your mind to think in a certain way. You tell yourself, "Ah, if you see there's no self, if you see that all things are empty, that must be Awakening." But that's not the case. You can't clone Awakening. It's always an unexpected discovery when it comes. It never comes quite the way you conceived it.

So even though the Buddha gave us his discoveries, and they've been passed down for all these generations, we have to keep re-proving them for ourselves, because we have to keep checking our understanding of what he had to say. All of the discoveries he tells us about are in words that we can look up in the dictionary. We can understand the words, but we're coming from ignorance, so

our understanding of the words is an ignorant understanding. We can never be quite sure that we really understand what he had to say. If we really understood, things would open up. There'd be Awakening. But the fact that there's no Awakening yet means that we don't yet understand. So we have to keep testing things, trying new approaches to figure where we're still ignorant, where our blind spots still are. If you don't improvise, if you don't play, you don't see. The intelligence of a new discovery just doesn't happen.

So the important thing here is the method, and the heart of the method is how to get the mind centered in such a way that it's both still and alert, aware all around, with everything very still. See what the movements of the mind look like from that perspective. See how you can experiment with them from that perspective, asking the kinds of questions the Buddha recommends. Watch things arise, watch them pass away, look for what their allure is, what makes them attractive. Look for their drawbacks, look for their escape from them, the release from them.

The Buddha was confident enough in his method that he encouraged people to test it for themselves. "You can't go just by what your teacher says," he told the Kalamas. So when you're testing his teaching, make sure you've got the method right, and see if you can prove for yourself whether what the Buddha said was true: that there really is a deathless element, and that you really can achieve it through your own efforts.

Battling Darkness

August 6, 2005

One of the standard analogies for meditation is that you're going into battle with all the habits of the mind that create suffering. They're called defilements because they darken the mind. As the Buddha once said, the mind is luminous, but these defilements come creeping in. If the mind didn't have some luminosity, you wouldn't be able to develop it. Everything would stay murky and dark. But the mind does have a knowing nature. It does have the capability of seeing things clearly both inside and out—just that the defilements get in the way. They're like clouds that obscure the sun.

So these are the things that we're going to battle. Fortunately, they're not clouds. If you tried to do battle with clouds you'd really be up a creek. If you tried to cut through a cloud, what would there be to cut through?

But if you take the analogy that you're going into battle, you can start thinking about how people wage war, how they engage in a successful fight. The first thing of course is learning how to pick your battles. There are a lot of things you could fight about, but you'd waste your energy. If you waste your energy on the trivial things, then when the important things come you're not up for them.

This is why we have to focus our energies on one issue, and that issue is: Why does the mind create suffering for itself? Everything we do, we think we're doing it for the sake of happiness, for the sake of our wellbeing, and yet we end up doing things that cause suffering, both for ourselves and for those around us. Many times we see it very blatantly right before our eyes that, yes, this suffering is dependent on what we're doing, and yet we seem compelled to do it. This is *the* important issue. If you can take care of this one issue, all other issues are going to get resolved. So you focus on the qualities of mind that lead you to cause suffering. Those are the things you're going to battle.

Once you've chosen your battle, the next step is to find a good stronghold, a place where you're secure, where you have the advantage over the enemy. This is why we practice concentration; this is why we develop mindfulness of the present moment. This is going to be your stronghold because this is where you can see these things in action. So you want to create a place here in the present that's comfortable, where you feel at ease, where you feel secure, where you feel solid.

Start out by staying with the breath—and just keep reminding yourself not to get entangled in any other issues right now. If other issues do come up, fend

them off just to the extent you need in order to create a space so you can get back to the breath, to a sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing with the breath, so that the breath feels full as you breathe in, full as you breathe out. You're not squeezing out the energy of the body as you breathe out; you're not building up tension as you breathe in. Allow the breath to come in and out with a sense of fullness that you can maintain both through the in-breath and through the out-. Then let that sense of fullness spread through the body. That's your stronghold.

Get so that you can stay here in all situations, because you're going to need your stronghold in all situations. There will be times when you venture out to do battle with the enemy and realize that the enemy has more troops than you expected, so you need to beat a strategic retreat. You need a good place to retreat to, a place to come back to no matter what the situation. So try to get familiar with this spot where the breath feels comfortable in the body, where the mind feels at ease with the breath. That's your stronghold.

It's from this position that you can do your work of insight. The qualities of insight, discernment, wisdom are like a sword. They cut through all the confusion, they cut through all the connections that keep those defilements together, that keep them strong. As you get to know the movements of your mind, you begin to see that there are lots of little events in the mind that you tie together. You connect this one with that one, that one with this one, and all of a sudden you've strung together a huge enemy. You tell narratives that connect this event with that feeling and that feeling with that event, and then it becomes a huge web by which you catch yourself. So you've got to learn to cut through that web.

The nature of insight, as the Buddha said, is in seeing things in five ways, or in understanding five things about whatever the defilement is, whatever the story is. Step one is learning simply how to watch it arise. Step two, watch it pass away. Learn to see these things simply as events that come and go in the mind. That helps give you some distance from them. In other words, when a story world comes up in your mind, you don't jump into the world. You look at it as an outsider. It's the same as when you drive past a drive-in theater and see a film up on the screen. If you allow yourself to get sucked into the idea that there's actually a story being portrayed up there, you could drive off the road. But if you simply see it as lights moving on the screen, you don't get sucked in. That helps to dismantle any reality you'd give to the film.

The same holds true with the mind: We give all kinds of trust and reality to the thought constructs that come up in the mind, but if you learn to see them simply as events, little firings of the synapses, you cut through any compulsion to get involved in that story line all over again. When you can pull yourself out

of that thought-world, you begin to see the construction that goes into maintaining it.

And particularly, you want to see two things about the way it's constructed. These are steps three and four. Three is: What gratification do you get out of that thought-world? Even though it may be causing you suffering, there must be some pleasure, some gratification in creating it. Otherwise you wouldn't indulge in it. It would hold no attraction at all. So learn to look for where that gratification is. Sometimes, when you see it, you'll feel ashamed that you could have fallen for it. Then, step four, look for the drawbacks: If you stick with that thought-world, what is it going to do? Where does it lead you? Some of the drawbacks you'll see immediately with the sense of tension, with the sense of dis-ease that arises both mentally and physically as you create and consume that thought-world. Some of the drawbacks will come later. You've got to learn to look for both.

The most difficult step is the fifth: Learn to see the escape from that thought-world, from that pattern, from that habit. Sometimes just looking at the arising and passing away of the thought-world is enough to undercut any sense of reality or trustworthiness in the thought-world, and it will go away. Other thought-worlds are more compelling. You have to look very carefully to see the gratification, to see the drawbacks, and you have to use your imagination to find the escape. This is not just a passive process of watching arising and passing away. You have to see where in the mind there's that little voice telling you that you've got to believe in this narrative about that thought-world, that you can't do it any other way. There will be that voice with its repeated message. That's why it's called a compulsion.

A lot of our compulsions come from the fact that we can't imagine any other way of reacting to a particular memory or a particular idea. Our imaginations are limited—and sometimes dishonest. To break out of the limitations and shake out the dishonesty, you have to sit down and very consciously try to think of other ways of reacting. One compulsion is the part of you says, "You've got to get upset whenever this memory comes back. If you don't get upset, you're just being a milquetoast. People are going to walk all over you." Put a question mark next to that, and then check to see what other voices come up. Whatever the voices, learn how to put question marks next to them, too. The simple act of questioning reminds you that there's an alternative. Ask yourself, "Does that have to be true? What if the opposite were true?" And just that much can be enough to jolt your imagination to think in other ways to get out of the rut of that particular defilement, whether it's greed, anger, delusion, lust, fear, pride, jealousy, whatever.

Learning how to cut through any defilement requires a knowledge that has these five aspects: seeing it arising, seeing it passing away, seeing its gratification, seeing its drawbacks, and then seeing the escape from it. When your sword can cut in all five directions in this way, you begin to appreciate what meditation can do. It really does free you from the mind's old habits of creating suffering for itself—the habits that keep telling you, "I'm doing this, I'm doing that because I want to be happy. You have to do things this way in order for happiness to be found," and yet turning up with unhappiness as a result. There's a wrong connection in there that you've got to cut through, and this five-edged knowledge is what allows you to cut it.

So these are your basic strategies, your basic weapons. First, you've got to choose the right battle. That's why we have Right View. Then you need a stronghold, a safe place from which to launch your attack. That's what the concentration is for. And then you have to look at the events in the mind from these five angles. That's your sword. When you're equipped in this way, you can take on the really essential battle in life, which is to free yourself from suffering. You've got the tools, the weapons, you need to win.

It's all very basic, but so many times in life we miss out on the good things because we overlook the basics. So learn how to appreciate the basics, because they're the things that can really help you.

Perception

August 19, 2005

That phrase in the chant just now — “those who don’t discern suffering” — sounds a little strange, doesn’t it? You’d think that everybody would discern suffering, but the verb here is important. Everybody *experiences* suffering, but not everybody discerns it. “Discerning” means to understand, to see it for what it is, to the point where you can let it go and put an end to it.

That requires looking at it very carefully. And for all the suffering we go through in our lives, we look at so little very carefully. That’s our problem. We have a lot of ideas about suffering, but have you ever stopped to ask yourself, “Where did you pick up those ideas?” Some of them go way back to before you even knew language.

The first thing that happened after you were born was that you cried — unless you were too stunned even to cry, and they had to spank you to make you cry. You even experienced suffering in the womb. There’s a story in the Canon about a young boy who stayed in his mother’s womb for years, and when he finally came out he was able to speak. The first thing he talked about was how miserable he was there in the womb, in that bloody prison.

So we’ve been suffering all along, and the way we dealt with our suffering from those very early times probably still has an impact on how we deal with it now. Say there’s a pain in your leg. You probably have a mental image of that pain — maybe a visual image, a tactile image, a sense of its shape. Back as a child, when you believed in ghosts, you may have seen the pain as a ghost. It was a *thing* with a will, and you thought it was coming after you. You didn’t know any better. But even though your conscious mind knows better now, a lot of your subconscious thoughts may not know better. This is one of the reasons why we have to meditate — to get the mind still enough so you can see these subconscious thoughts in action.

You have to understand that the mind’s not divided into two sections: the conscious mind and the unconscious mind. It’s just that there’s conscious behavior in the mind and unconscious behavior, conscious events and unconscious events. One of the purposes of meditation is to get the mind more still so that things that used to be subconscious can become conscious. It’s like bringing them up into the light of day.

Or you can compare it to tuning in to a radio station. The more precisely you’re on the frequency, the less static there is. The less static, the more clearly

you can hear the signal. You pick up a lot of the subtleties you couldn't hear before because the static was obscuring them.

You get the mind still so that you can begin to discern the suffering around the pain. You'll be working on two levels. One is the physical pain itself, and the other is the mental suffering. Doctors have shown that our perception of pain is really dependent on a lot of mental factors. This is something you're going to see as you meditate—and it's something that we can each know only for ourselves. Doctors can run tests and not find any physical basis for the pain in the body, but the person really is experiencing pain. They can look at the pain center in the brain to see whether it's activated or not, but they can't tell you how your pain feels.

So just the physical pain itself has a lot of mental factors, and the most important one is the factor of perception—the way we label things. Sometimes the word "*sañña*" is also translated as "memory," which is not really accurate. Memory plays a role in perception—we apply our old perceptions of pain to our new experience of pain—but memory deals with the past. Here we're trying to focus on the present, and yet we use our memories from the past to cover up the present, to shape our experience of the present.

Say, when there's a pain in your leg, a pain in your waist, a pain in the back, what perceptions does the mind apply to it? If you can't see the process in action, you can try consciously applying different perceptions. As you work in concentration, you should be getting some practice in this—because, after all, each of the stages of concentration, all the way up to the dimension of nothingness, is called a perception attainment.

For example, when you're working with the breath, the label of "breath" should be your primary perception. The label you apply to your experience of the body is "breath." Not only the in-and-out breath: Try to experience all the different parts of your body as types of breath energy. If your arm really were breath energy, would it be good breath energy or blocked breath energy? Just try applying that label very consistently to the sensation of the arm, and after a while your experience of the arm is going to change. Try applying it to all the different parts of your body. See how that changes the way you experience those parts.

You'll see that the actual physical experience of the body is going to change because of the mental label. And the advantage of this is that you can start doing different things with the sensations. If you perceive a particular sensation as something solid, there's not much you can do with it. If you perceive it as blocked energy, there are ways to unblock energy. You can figure out how to redirect it, how to loosen up the blockage. In other words, the perception is useful because you can do things with it.

If you stick with that perception of the breath, trying to keep it as constant as possible, you learn two things. One is that you get more and more sensitive as to what you're doing in order to maintain the perception. You start seeing the process of perception a lot more clearly. Two, you get the breath to calm down so that it's really, really still. Once the breath energy throughout the body seems to flow nicely, it'll get more and more subtle. If you stick with your one perception, you find that the brain uses a lot less oxygen. And so you need to breathe less, until you finally get to the point where the oxygen coming in and out of your pores is all you need. The in-and-out breath grows still.

When the breath gets still, your sense of the shape of the body begins to change. The sense of boundary between inside and outside the body begins to dissolve away. You've just got a mist of sensations, and you can change your perception right there. Instead of focusing on the mist, you can focus on the space between those little bits of sensation, and all of a sudden you're with "space."

If you can hold onto that perception of space long enough, it's going to change your experience of the present moment, your sense of what it's like to have a physical body here. The potential for being a physical body is there but you choose not to stir up that potential. Just stay with the space. Just this much teaches you a lot about perception.

Or before you go to "space," you might focus on the different properties in the body—the warmth, the coolness, the sense of heaviness. Perceive the body as "all fire," or as "all water," or as "all solid." Just that perception will change the way you experience the body physically. Then perceive all these various properties as balanced: not too cold, not too hot, not too heavy, not too light. Everything all mixed together just right. This will also teach you a lot about perception. You begin to see the labels you're using a lot more clearly. As you get more and more familiar with your conscious perceptions, you begin to detect the less conscious ones as well.

And you're ready to start taking pain apart. One of the first things you notice when you look at a pain is the sense that it seems to be a solid mass in the body. Is it really? Or is it the result of your perception? Try changing your perception to see what happens. Again, think of the pain as just tiny dots of sensation that can move around, that have space between them. The breath can flow through the pain. The blood can flow easily through the pain. Try to distinguish which of those sensations are just body sensations and which are the pain sensations, and you begin to realize that all the things you used to glom together are actually lots of different kinds of sensation. Only the way you perceived them was what made them so threatening.

You may have picked up that old way of perceiving because you thought that putting a boundary around the pain was a good way of dealing with it. Putting a boundary around the pain, you thought, might keep it from spreading. But when you really look at the process of putting up and maintaining that boundary, you begin to see that often it's an unskillful way of dealing with the pain. So you can replace that perception with more skillful ones.

Then you can look at the other perceptions and thought-fabrications that gather around the pain—the stories the mind tells itself about how long you've had this pain, or how much you've suffered in life, and "poor you": all this suffering, all this pain. You begin to ask yourself, "Do you really have to believe those stories? Can you stop making the stories for a little while?" See what happens. Pain is an excellent place to start seeing all the different processes in the mind, because you begin to see that it's not only a physical pain. There's a lot of mental activity around the pain that can cause the really important pain, the really important suffering: in other words, the mental burden you build up around the pain. If you look carefully, you can see these different stories, these different perceptions, simply as events in the mind, and you can just drop the habit of listening to them and believing them. See what happens.

What you're doing is not totally dropping the habit of perception. You're applying new perceptions because you find them more skillful. This is the Buddha's approach to all of the aggregates. You're not trying to do away with form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, and consciousness—at least not right away. The first thing you've got to do is learn how to convert them into the path. They use the word "aggregates," "heaps," for the word "*khandha*." You might think of them as big heaps of gravel. And you have the choice: You can put the gravel in a bag and carry it around on your shoulder, weighing yourself down, or you can figure out a way of turning it into an asphalt covering for your road. Put it down on the ground, mix it with a binding agent—and then you have a smooth road to walk on.

The binding agent here is mindfulness and alertness: learning to be very mindful and alert about how you use these different aggregates. After all, the aggregates themselves aren't really things. They're activities. They're events in the mind. You begin to see that even your experience of form itself is affected by perception. And you begin to approach all these things by being mindful and alert. "Mindful" means keeping what you want to do in mind, keeping in mind your desire to put an end to stress. "Alert" means seeing if you're really doing it, and at the same time seeing the results of what you're doing. Both of these qualities require perceptions.

And then there's arduousness. Being "ardent" means that if you see yourself causing stress, you try your best to figure out other ways of acting. These three

qualities—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency—are the binding agents that turn these events, these aggregates, into the path. And they require perceptions, concepts, in order to do their work.

So we're not condemning the conceptual mind; we're not condemning the mind that perceives things and puts labels on them. We're learning to look at the process of perception and figure out how to do it more skillfully. Ultimately, you do get to an experience that goes beyond the aggregates, but the only way to get there is to develop this path—turning the aggregates from a burden on your shoulder to a smooth road under your feet.

So if you want to understand perception, the first thing you've got to do is learn how to do it consciously. The more consciously you stick with a particular perception—such as “breath” or “space”—the more you can understand how the mind fashions perceptions. You begin to detect where to look to see the less conscious perceptions, the ones causing stress and pain. You see them in action and you can drop them, replacing them with other perceptions that are more skillful—until finally you get to the point where you don't need them at all.

Strategies for Happiness

August 26, 2004

Those chants are often juxtaposed just before we meditate: “The world is swept away.” “This body is filled with all sorts of unclean things.” And then: “May I be happy.” The purpose of this juxtaposition is to make you stop and think: Given this swept-away world, this unclean, decaying body, where does true happiness lie? Where does a safe and secure happiness lie? This is the big question we have to ask ourselves, because everybody wants happiness. As the Buddha said, all things, all phenomena that you can experience are rooted in desire. And what is the desire? It’s the desire for happiness.

The body, events in the mind: They all come from our desire for happiness. And we act on that desire, sometimes in skillful and sometimes in unskillful ways. That’s why the situation we’re living in is such a mixed bag, in terms of being satisfactory or not. You have to look carefully at your actions to see which ones really are conducive to happiness and which ones are not. You can’t rest secure in the notion that there’s somebody out there taking care of everything, and it’s all going to turn out all right in the end. *We* are the ones who are shaping our experience, and if we’re not careful, we’re going to shape things in an unskillful way.

The Buddha saw that all of our activities are aimed at happiness. And what was especially interesting is that he saw how much of what we experience is an activity. Even our sense of self, of who we are, is an activity. It’s a fabrication. We fabricate the decision to identify with certain things. The thought that “I am,” the thought of identification, is an act of putting things together. It’s a fabrication, an activity, aimed at happiness.

And to some extent it works. People who have a very poorly formed sense of self have trouble managing their lives. A certain level of identification is needed, a certain sense of self is needed, just to function properly. And so, in learning to be more skillful, the Buddha has us take that sense of self and try to make it more coherent, so that it can promote your desire for true happiness, a happiness that lasts.

Then you ask yourself, “What am I doing that’s actually leading in that direction? What am I doing that’s leading in the other direction?” This involves maintaining a sense of what in Pali is called *hiri* and *ottappa*: shame and fear of evil. In other words, shame at the idea of doing something you know would be harmful, and fear of the consequences of doing harmful things. This type of fear,

the Buddha said, is a useful kind of fear. It's what keeps us on the path. And it requires a certain sense of self, a certain sense of self-esteem, and the opposite of apathy—realizing that what you do is important, for it's going to have consequences down the line, and you don't want to suffer the consequences of unskillfulness. This is what keeps you on the path: the sense that there are dangers out there, and that the dangers lie in your unskillful actions.

But this training also implies trust: trust that you can do things in the proper way, trust in the principle that your actions really do matter, and trust that the quest for happiness is a good quest, if you do it properly. If you take your quest for happiness seriously, the Buddha says, you actually end up developing qualities that are the opposite of selfishness: compassion, wisdom, and purity.

First, compassion: You realize that if your happiness depends on the suffering of other people it's not going to last. Other people want happiness, too, and they're not going to sit around and allow you to maintain any happiness that oppresses them. They're going to destroy it. So if you're really sincere about happiness, you also want to include their happiness in the equation. You develop the quality of compassion, taking the happiness of other people into account.

As for wisdom, the Buddha said that the sign of a wise person is realizing that sometimes the things you like to do are going to cause suffering, and the things you don't like to do are going to cause happiness. It's a measure of your wisdom to realize that and to act accordingly. In other words, you have to appreciate the principle of causality, for it's going to affect your happiness. That way you get wiser and wiser about causes and effects. If you're wise, you'll look for a happiness that's secure and long-term, rather than just simply what you can grab at any moment.

And as for purity, as the Buddha told his son Rahula, really paying careful attention to your actions and their results, and resolving not to repeat mistakes that cause suffering for yourself or for other people: That's how people attain purity.

So compassion, wisdom, and purity—the qualities we associate with the Buddha—come from taking our quest for happiness seriously. Good things come from this sense of self that wants to find a long-term happiness.

Ultimately though, as we all know, the Buddha also teaches not-self—in other words, showing us that the things we tend to identify with can get in the way of a higher level of happiness. But always keep in mind that even here the quest for happiness lies in the background. It's the overriding issue. You first have to become skillful in the way you manage your happiness, realizing that being generous, being virtuous, training the mind are things you have to do; that you're responsible for your happiness, and have to develop these qualities that are harmless both to yourself and to others.

Once you've got that principle firmly in mind, then you can start turning to the teaching on not-self. You see that the various things you identify with leave you open to all kinds of dangers. If you identify with things that are impermanent, things that can be changed by causal conditions beyond your control, you're putting yourself in a weak position, an exposed, dangerous position. And this is where the teaching on not-self comes in.

Ajaan Maha Boowa compares this teaching to a stick that you use hit the hand of a monkey that's always grabbing at things. It's a warning to yourself that if you reach into fire, it's going to burn you, so you have to slap your hand away from the fire.

Many people resist the teaching on not-self and all the teachings that are preparatory for that, like the chant we had just now on the body. They feel that these teachings are going to deprive them of the strategies they use to find happiness. But these teachings are meant to protect you from suffering. They're there to remind you that if you latch onto the body as yours in a really strong sense, you're going to suffer. If you can see it as a tool that you use toward happiness, that's a different issue. But so many of us don't see it in that way. The body is us. It's ours. But what happens to the body? It gets old, and it can get sick in all sorts of horrible ways even before you get old. And it's not the case that these things happen only to people who don't take care of their bodies. They happen to everybody and can happen at any time. If you identify with the body, you're leaving yourself exposed to all sorts of problems, to all sorts of dangers.

The same holds true for feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness. But the Buddha doesn't have you just drop and abandon these things—he has you turn them into the path. In other words, you take these things you identify with and you turn them into tools. Once they're tools, it's possible to get a sense of distance from them and yet still get some use out of them as well. In this way, the strategy of not-self, instead of depriving you of your strategies for happiness, actually provides you with a wider range of strategies.

As we're meditating here, what are we focusing on? We're focusing on the body, focusing on the breath. We're learning to maximize the feelings of pleasure that come from the breath. We're learning ways of perceiving the breath energy in the body that create stronger and stronger states of concentration. We're learning to direct our thoughts and evaluate the breath—that's fabrication—and to be consciously aware of all this. So you've got all five aggregates here turned into a path. There will be a sense of identification with the path, but it's different from just plain old straight identifying with these things. There's a more skillful use of them so that they lead to a greater and greater sense of wellbeing and security. As you get more identified with the path in this way, the other things

outside that you used to identify as you and yours—that if they changed were going to cause big trouble in your life: You can pull away from those attitudes, because you have a better place to be.

You try to focus all of your desires around maintaining this sense of peace and wellbeing in the mind. At some point, when that peace and wellbeing is really secure, you can undercut those desires as well, seeing that even here in this state of concentration, there's still inconstancy, there's still stress. In seeing that, you can let go entirely. You've seen that it's possible for there to be a dimension where there's no sense of "I am," no sense of identification, and yet it's not annihilation. In fact, it is just the opposite. The only thing that gets annihilated there are stress and suffering. That's what we're aiming for as we learn to take our desire for happiness seriously and to follow it through in a consistent way. Then, as Ajaan Suwat once said, when you reach the ultimate happiness, who cares if there's a self or not a self, or whether you can find someone who's experiencing this or what? It doesn't matter, for what *is* there is the ultimate happiness.

Even though the Buddha talks a lot about suffering and stress, the unattractiveness of the body, the lack of control you have over things, it's not for a negative or pessimistic purpose. It's to focus your desire for happiness in another direction. In effect he says, "Look, you can't find true happiness in these places. You've got to look someplace else." This is the theme underlying all of his teachings: that true happiness really does matter. It's important. It's worth giving yourself over to. The desire for true happiness is worth taking seriously because it actually leads to true happiness if you follow through with it skillfully.

So although sometimes we may resist his teachings—because they seem to threaten our ideas about what we need to do and to believe in order to be happy—it's good to step back and question our assumptions. There are many, many people who have followed the Buddha's way and found that, yes, it does lead to a true happiness—and that the happiness you get from following other paths doesn't nearly compare.

When you see fear in your practice, remember: There is skillful fear and unskillful fear. Skillful fear focuses on the harm and suffering that comes from doing unskillful things. Unskillful fear comes from holding onto things that you know are going to change. Once you understand this, you can work on refining your sense of self and ultimately learn to adopt the teaching on not-self as well. When you learn how to use these teachings skillfully—at their appropriate times, in the appropriate places—and you find they really are conducive to happiness, then you see that there's nothing to criticize in the Buddha's teachings. They're there to help us find the happiness we want. He's not forcing them on anybody. There's no power play involved here at all. He offers his teachings out of

compassion. He's found that these practices work for him, and they work for other people as well. It's simply a question of whether we understand them properly and learn how to use them skillfully. When we do, there are no more issues.

Freedom Undefined

December 17, 2004

There's a passage in the *Dhammapada* where the Buddha says that life as a householder is difficult, life as a monk gone forth is difficult. Then he ends by saying, "So be neither." Of course, what he means by that is to find a way of not having to be anything at all. That requires practice. It's a skill—the skill we're working on right here, the skill that takes you out of having to live the household life or have to live the life of a monk. Without this skill, those are the only choices you have. Derived from them are lots of other little choices, but they're all trapped inside those two categories.

What we're looking for is a path of practice that leads to freedom from any kind of category at all. As the Buddha said, what you are is limited, measured by what you cling to. So the path beyond categories has to be a path that gets rid of clinging. When you hold onto the body, that's what you are. When you hold onto any of the other aggregates, you're classified as a feeling-clinger, a perception-clinger, a mental-fabrication-, or consciousness-clinger. You create your identity by what you cling to. This is why the Buddha never answered questions about what a human being is, because a human being can be almost anything.

So this noble eightfold path that we're following here is a path that gets us out of having to be identified with anything, of having to be limited to anything. That's the skill we're working on. It's not an easy skill, but when you realize that all of the alternatives out there are difficult, then you realize that it doesn't make much sense to focus on the difficulties of the path, for at the very least this is a path that leads to a way out.

Three years ago, when I sensed that Ajaan Suwat was about to pass away, I went to see him in Thailand. It was inspiring and heartening to see him, because even though he went through a lot of difficulties after his accident—paralyzed from the base of the spine on down, brain damage, lung damage, having to deal with very difficult people looking after him—he always maintained his good cheer. One of the last things he said to me was that he had begun to notice that the perceptions his brain was sending to him were getting weirder and weirder all the time. He had to learn how not to listen to them. Then he said, "But that thing I got from the meditation: That hasn't changed. That's always there."

"That thing" is what he called it. That's the freedom we're working toward, so that no matter what happens in terms of aging, illness, and death, there is

always “that thing” there. That’s what we want to ferret out. That’s what we want to know. So we foster the customs of the noble ones, which focus on taking delight in this path, this path of letting go and developing. You let go of the patterns of thought, speech, and action that get in the way of clear knowing. You develop the qualities that encourage clear knowing: Right View, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration. You learn to take enjoyment in these things. You let them capture your imagination.

They’ve done studies of people who are expert in fields involving skill and dexterity, and they’ve discovered that what sets the experts apart from people who are just good at those skills is that the skill captures their imaginations. One, they like doing it; two, they like rising to the challenge. If they make mistakes, they try to learn from them. One article tells of the admissions office in a very famous school of surgery. For years they were working on the questions asked at the applicant interviews to try to figure out which questions would ferret out the people who didn’t have the potential to be surgeons as opposed to those who did. Because it was one of the best schools in the country, all the applicants had great grades, great recommendations, but that was no guarantee that they’d actually do well when faced with a patient on the table.

The admissions people discovered a pair of questions that were most accurate in figuring out who to admit and who not to admit. The first was: “Can you tell us about a mistake you made recently?” If the applicant said, “No, I can’t think of any mistakes I made recently,” he or she would be rejected. The second question was: “What would you do differently if you had the chance to do it again?” If the person was able to jump right in and say, “I thought that next time around I might try this,” that was the sort of person they wanted—someone who would look at his or her actions, recognize a mistake, and then immediately want to figure out how to not make that mistake again, someone who exercised ingenuity in trying to figure out another approach.

All across the board, the ones who excel at their skills—whether as musicians, sportsmen, or craftsmen—are the ones who find that the skill captures their imagination. That’s why the effort put into the skill is no big deal for them. They get so absorbed that the effort becomes enjoyable. They like thinking about it, they like figuring out the problems they face, and sometimes detecting problems that other people might not even notice. Then they try working out solutions. These are the kind of people who do well.

The same principle applies in the customs of the noble ones. You delight in letting go, you delight in developing. Working on the qualities of your mind really captures your imagination. That way, the difficulties of living in a community with other people who are also practicing aren’t big issues. You’ve got the rules; you’ve got the structure; you’ve got the support to do the practice.

It's not so much that you're here to learn about Buddhism; you're learning to use the tools that Buddhism offers to sort out your own mind. First the tools help you look at the habits, the things the mind is doing. Then, when you notice that what you're doing is causing suffering to yourself or other people, you have the tools to change those habits. If the classic tools don't work, you can use your own ingenuity to extrapolate on them. When you find that that captures your imagination, then the difficulties don't really impress themselves on your mind.

The whole purpose of this practice is to focus on what's actually happening in your mind. The big questions are, "What are you doing that's causing unnecessary suffering for yourself or for other people? What can you do to stop doing that?" These questions apply not only to things you do and say, but also the way your mind operates, the way the mind treats itself, the way it deals with its own thoughts and feelings. You want these questions to take charge.

This requires a shift in your center of gravity, because for a lot of us, we have a strong sense of who we are, with our activities as something secondary, something in service of the "who" that we are. If we take our sense of our self, of who we are, as the absolute, then the question of what we're doing becomes relative. Then the preferences of that self take over, and the path becomes hard. But if you switch things around so that the question of becoming more skillful in your actions becomes your absolute while your sense of who you are becomes relative to that question, then the path becomes a lot easier. It's a lot more enjoyable. It makes sense.

This is why the Buddha focused his four noble truths on precisely this question, because that's what the four truths are: an issue of skillful action, desirable result, unskillful action, undesirable result. They're a way of sorting those issues out. As for the other questions—concerning the world, the oneness or plurality of the universe, the existence of a self, the nature of the life force, the fate of an awakened person after death: Those questions get set aside. Those are not the issues. The issues are what is skillful, what is not.

When those questions become the center of your concern, when they capture your imagination, then issues of world and self fall to the wayside. This gives you a beginning sense of what it's like to be freed from the question of who you are, what kind of person you are, because you realize that those issues are all determined by the skill with which you act, particularly the skill with which you approach your clingings, your attachments. Those are the determining issues. When you learn how to practice, developing concentration and discernment to see through those clingings, then the whole need to identify yourself, limit yourself, measure yourself, goes by the wayside. As you follow the path, the sufferings caused by the need to define yourself grow lighter and lighter. Even

more so when all the clinging is gone: That's it—no need to be defined by anything at all.

There's a passage where a monk has been asked by some people from outside of the Buddha's teachings about how the Buddha answers the question of whether the awakened person exists or not after death. The monk, extemporizing, answers that there has to be an answer beside the four that are usually given: existing, not existing, both, neither. His questioners all make fun of him. "You don't know anything about the Buddha's teaching," they sneer. Even people outside the teaching knew that. So the monk goes to see the Buddha. The Buddha says, "How can you say anything like that? Can you identify where the Tathagata is right now? Can you define him in terms of any of the five aggregates?" Well, no. "As something separate from the five aggregates?" No. There's nothing that you could point to, even here in the present moment—unlike your ordinary person, who can be identified with his clings. The Buddha went on to say, "When you can't even identify the Tathagata here and now, how can you say anything about what he is after death, or how he exists, or what his mode of being is after death?"

Total freedom. Indescribable and undefined. That's what this practice is all about. If the idea of total freedom captures your imagination, then the difficulties get smaller and smaller. Even though they may be large in your mind right now, they start looming smaller and smaller as you stick with the path.

The Buddha once said that if you could make a deal that every day for 100 years you'd be speared with 100 spears in the morning, 100 spears at noon, 100 spears in the evening—300 spear-wounds every day—but with a guarantee that in 100 years you'd gain full Awakening, that would be a deal worth taking. When the Awakening came, you wouldn't consider that it had been gained with difficulty.

It's up to you to decide whether you find that passage intriguing. Then again, you can look at the alternative: what life is like if you don't.

Glossary

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor.

Arahant: A person who has abandoned all ten of the fetters that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth, whose heart is free of mental defilement, and is thus not destined for future rebirth. An epithet for the Buddha and the highest level of his Noble Disciples. Sanskrit form: arhat.

Bodhisatta: A person aspiring to Buddhahood. Sanskrit form: bodhisattva.

Deva: Literally, “shining one.” An inhabitant of the celestial or terrestrial heavenly realms.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action. (2) A phenomenon in and of itself. (3) Mental quality. (4) Doctrine, teaching. (5) Nibbana (although there are passages in the Pali Canon describing nibbana as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: dharma.

Jhana: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. Sanskrit form: dhyana.

Hinayana: The “lesser” vehicle. A perjorative Mahayana term for any Buddhist tradition that extols the path to arahantship.

Kamma: Intentional act. Sanskrit form: karma.

Khandha: Aggregate; heap; pile. The aggregates are the basic building blocks of describable experience, as well as the building blocks from which one’s sense of “self” is constructed. There are five in all: physical form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, and consciousness. Sanskrit form: skandha.

Mahayana: The “greater” vehicle. The course of training for a bodhisatta.

Nibbana: Literally, the “unbinding” of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. Sanskrit form: nirvana.

Pali: The name of the earliest extant canon of the Buddha’s teachings and, by extension, of the language in which it was composed.

Samsara: Literally, “wandering on.” The process of taking repeated rebirth.

Samvega: A sense of dismay, terror, or urgency.

Sangha: On the conventional level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. On the ideal level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least their first taste of the Deathless.

Sankhara: Fabrication; fashioning. The forces and factors that fashion things, the process of fashioning, and the fashioned things that result; all things

conditioned, compounded, or concocted by nature, whether on the physical or the mental level. In some contexts this word is used as a blanket term for all five khandhas. As the fourth khandha, it refers specifically to the fashioning or forming of urges, thoughts, etc., within the mind.

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: sutra.

Tathagata: One who has “become true” (*tatha + agata*) or one who is truly gone (*tatha + gata*); an epithet for the Buddha.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline.

Vipassana: Insight.

Wat (Thai): Monastery.