MEDITATIONS 6

Meditations6

Dhamma Talks

by

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Introduction

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

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

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

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Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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A Connoisseur of Happiness

January 5, 2010

A couple of years back, I got a phone call from a friend who had attended a Dhamma talk where the teacher had said that "life is suffering" is the second noble truth. The friend called up to scoff at the teacher, saying that, of course, everyone knows that that's not the second noble truth, that's the first noble truth. And I had to tell him that it wasn't any noble truth. The Buddha never said that life is suffering. He said there is suffering in life. That was his first noble truth. And he identified what that suffering is, but he went on to say that there is a cause for suffering that you can abandon, and there is a path to the end of suffering that you can develop, so that you can reach the end of suffering, all of which can be found in life.

So life isn't just suffering. It's important to underline that point, because so many people misunderstand the Buddha's attitude toward happiness and suffering. Just this last weekend, I heard someone saying that the Buddha's basic teachings are that all things are inconstant and all things are suffering. That's not the case, either. As the Buddha once said, if there were no pleasure in the five aggregates, we wouldn't be attached to them. They do offer pleasure. And we need to understand the different kinds of pleasure they offer, so we can use that pleasure as a means to the highest happiness or the highest pleasure: *nibbana.*

The Pali word for pleasure and happiness is *sukha.* It's one of the Buddha's most basic terms, and—as is so often the case with the most central terms in the Buddha's teachings—he doesn't define it. *Sukha* can be translated as bliss, pleasure, ease, wellbeing, or happiness. What the Buddha does describe in detail are the different levels of sukha and the different ways that sukha functions. In other words, he describes what's practical to know about sukha so that you can know which kinds of sukha to pursue and which to avoid.

I think one of the reasons he doesn't define *sukha* is because, as you practice, your sense of what counts as happiness is going to develop and get more refined. So it's important that your idea of happiness doesn't get nailed down too tightly when you're starting out.

The Buddha's own search was a search for true happiness, a happiness that doesn't age, grow ill, or die. That's what he was looking for. After having

spent years indulging in the intense sensual pleasures of the palace, he did what so many people do when they have been indulging in sensual pleasure that way: He went to the other extreme and practiced austerities—in his case, for six years. He denied himself food, forced himself not to breathe, and grew very emaciated because he was afraid of pleasure. One of the most important insights of that period, though, was that denying yourself any kind of pleasure at all is not the way. It doesn't lead to liberation.

So then the question arose in his mind: Is there another way? And he thought of the time when he was a child, sitting under a tree, and had entered the first jhana: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. Recollecting that, he had an instinctive sense that that would be the path, but then he asked himself: "Why am I afraid of that pleasure?" And he realized it was nothing to be afraid of. It wasn't intoxicating; it didn't cause any harm to anyone.

Those are the two defining aspects of any pleasure that's unskillful: It's harmful and it's intoxicating. We see so many pleasures in life that involve oppressing other people. The people enjoying those pleasures may not be conscious of the fact that they're causing oppression or hardship. To whatever extent they do notice, they'll often close their minds to it and deny that it's causing anybody any harm—or if it *is* causing somebody harm, it's causing harm to people or beings who don't matter. That attitude is one of the things that makes that pleasure unskillful. Not only does it harm other people, but it also fosters unskillful qualities of indifference and lack of shame.

Intoxicating pleasure is the kind that dulls the mind so you can't really see what you're doing. The most obvious examples of this sort of pleasure are those that come from alcohol and drugs, but there are other intoxicating pleasures as well. Anything that excites a very strong addiction, that dulls the mind, dulls your perceptions: That's a kind of pleasure to be avoided.

The pleasure of jhana, though, is neither harmful nor intoxicating. Sometimes modern Dhamma teachers will warn you about the dangers of getting attached to the pleasures of jhana, that somehow they're a major peril to be avoided and feared, but the Buddha never talked in those terms. Quite the contrary: He said that if you don't have the pleasure of jhana or something better than that, you won't be able to let go of your attachments to sensual pleasures.

To let go of a lower-level pleasure, you need something higher to hold on

to, something to substitute for it. Otherwise, you go sneaking back to your old ways, denying the fact that you're doing that. Or you grow attached to your pride that you're so strong, so resilient, and so tough in the practice that you don't need pleasure—but then that pride becomes a major obstacle to seeing where the mind is actually looking to feed. As the Buddha said, the pleasure of jhana is a necessary part of the practice. It's the kind of happiness that allows you to have a sense of wellbeing, a sense of nourishment along the way, and yet keeps the mind clear so that it sees what it's doing.

The Buddha actually talks of jhana in terms of food. He says we feed on rapture when we meditate. And he describes jhana as a storehouse of provisions. He compares the practice as a whole to building and maintaining a fortress on a frontier. Mindfulness is the gatekeeper who knows whom to let in and whom to keep out. Discernment is the well-plastered wall that the enemy can't climb because they can't gain a foothold on the plaster. Persistence is your army of soldiers. And jhana is your storehouse of grain, honey, oil: all the food you need in order to keep the gatekeeper and the army strong. So the pleasure of jhana is a necessary part of the practice. It keeps you nourished.

As for the danger of getting attached to that nourishment, I can find only one passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the danger of jhana, and it's relatively minor. He says that once you can attain jhana and you decide you don't want to go any further, it's like holding a stick covered with sap, and your hand gets stuck to the stick because of the sap. But jhana doesn't make it impossible to get unstuck. In fact, you need the stillness of jhana to look objectively at the pleasures you've been attached to so far in your life, to see that they're no match for the pleasures of concentration. Only then are you encouraged to ask yourself: Are there any drawbacks to this state of concentration? Is there something better than this? That reflection becomes a solvent that removes the sap from your hands.

In any event, I don't know anyone who's killed anyone, stolen anything, or broken any of the other precepts through attachment to jhana. But you look at the way people are attached to sensual pleasures: It's the source for a lot of the cruelty, heartlessness, and thoughtlessness in the world, all the harm that people cause one another. If you're not attached to the pleasure of jhana, if you don't have that available, you're going to sneak back to the types of pleasure that can cause all kinds of harm to yourself and to others.

So don't be afraid of the pleasure of jhana. Don't try to avoid it for fear

that you'll get stuck. Of course you're going to get stuck, at least for a while, but you're stuck on the kind of pleasure that allows you to clarify the mind. That way you can begin to see what's going on, where you're stuck, and how to get unstuck. This is an important part of noble right concentration: not simply that you get into the different levels of jhana, but that the mind can then step back while you're in the jhana to examine the state of jhana while you're still within its range. The Buddha gives the analogy of a person sitting who's watching someone who's lying down, or a person standing who's watching someone sitting. In other words, you're above and behind your own state of concentration, and you can see what's going on.

Or you could compare it to having your hand in a glove: When you're fully in the glove of jhana, you can't observe it. But when you pull the glove off a bit, without totally removing it from your hand, you can look around at the mind inside the glove. That way you thoroughly comprehend how the mind relates to its object, which gives you insight into the process of fabrication.

This is where fabrication becomes clearest: when you're in a state of strong concentration and you can see the movements of the mind very clearly. Ultimately, you reach the point where you decide that even the pleasure of jhana is not pleasant enough; it's not peaceful enough, because of the instabilities of fabrication. You want something more peaceful, something more solid than fabrication can make.

So it's not that you stop aiming at happiness and pleasure. It's just that your idea of happiness and pleasure gets more refined. This is when you can let go of the jhana and, through insight into the process of fabrication, allow the fabrication to stop. You no longer try to fabricate anything out of what you've got in the present moment. That's when the mind opens up in an unexpected way to something that's not fabricated. And the realization hits: that when the Buddha said there is a deathless happiness, he knew what he was talking about. You've got your evidence right here. You see very clearly the stress that's involved even in the fabrication of a very subtle pleasure of concentration, because you've got something better, the unfabricated, to compare it to.

So the Buddha is not teaching you to be a stoic with a stiff upper lip, denying yourself any pleasure or happiness. He himself was actually a connoisseur of pleasure. He wanted only the highest happiness. And he found it. As for us, he wants us to want only the highest happiness, and to practice so

we can find it, too. He didn't say that pleasure is bad or that numbness is good, but he did say that different levels of pleasure have different effects on the mind. You want to look at the pleasure you find in different aspects of your life to see which kinds of pleasure are harmful and intoxicating, and which ones help to clear the mind. The ones that clear the mind include not only the pleasure of concentration, but also the pleasure of generosity and the pleasure of observing the precepts. The Buddha talks about how the practice of generosity and the precepts gives rise to a sense of joy, a sense of wellbeing, that then becomes a basis for concentration.

From there, you develop the more refined levels of pleasure that come with concentration. As the mind grows clearer and clearer, you get to the ultimate pleasure, one totally free from disturbance, because it lies outside of space and time.

Years back, I attended a commemoration for Ajaan Lee's passing. It was the last commemoration I attended before I returned to the States. They had invited a senior monk from Bangkok to give the concluding Dhamma talk of the commemoration, but about 15 minutes before he was scheduled to get up on the Dhamma seat, he still hadn't arrived. They got a phone call from him, that he was stuck in traffic and wouldn't be able to make it in time. So they asked one of the forest ajaans to get up and give a talk instead. His talk was about how the central teaching of the Buddha was about suffering and stress. He talked for an hour about the four noble truths, with his major focus on the truth of suffering, suffering, suffering. Just a few minutes after he had finished, the senior monk from Bangkok finally arrived. So they asked him to get up on the sermon seat and give a talk, too. He hadn't heard what the previous talk was. He got up and he said the Buddha's central teaching was all about happiness.

And you know, both were right. The Buddha talked about suffering because he wanted us to see the suffering we tend not to see, so we can look for a higher happiness, and not just for the kind of happiness with which we tend to content ourselves.

So when the Buddha talked about *dukkha,* suffering or stress, he wasn't just saying that life is miserable and all you can do is accept the fact. He was saying that there is suffering but it doesn't have to be there. There's the suffering of the three characteristics, which is inherent in fabricated things. But on top of that is the suffering in the four noble truths, which is caused by craving and clinging. That kind of suffering you can put an end to. And when

you put an end to it, the suffering of the three characteristics no longer weighs on the mind because you've found something that lies beyond what's fabricated.

So the Buddha talked about suffering for the sake of happiness, for the sake of true happiness. He was like a doctor. When you go to see the doctor and he asks you, "Okay, what's wrong? Where does it hurt?" he's not being pessimistic. He focuses on your illness because he has a cure. The Buddha described himself as a doctor. He focused on stress and suffering because he had a cure, leading to the health of true happiness.

Always keep this point in mind as you practice. We're not here to run away from pleasure. We're here to see what pleasure really is, and become connoisseurs of pleasure, distinguishing between which kind of pleasure, when you indulge in it, has harmful results, and which kind of pleasure, when you indulge in it, becomes part of the path—so that you can find the ultimate pleasure that doesn't require indulgence at all. It's just there. That's what we're practicing for.

Virtue Contains the Practice

August 18, 2011

There's a passage in the Canon where a group of monks are going off to a foreign land and so they go to pay their respects to the Buddha. He asks them, "Have you gone to see Sariputta?" They say, No, they haven't, so he recommends that they do. When they pay their respects to Sariputta, he asks them, "Suppose you meet intelligent people in that foreign land who ask you what your teacher teaches: What are you going to tell them?" So the monks ask him what he would recommend that they say. The first thing he starts out with is, "Our teacher teaches the subduing of passion and delight."

Most of us, if we heard that as the first thing the Buddha taught, would probably run away. We like our passion; we like our delight. But notice that Sariputta starts off with an action. The Buddha teaches you something to *do.* As Sariputta explains it, if the person asks, "Passion and delight for what?" you say, "For the five aggregates." What's the danger of having that passion and delight for those things? It's that you suffer as they change. And the advantage of abandoning that passion and delight is that you put an end to that suffering.

So it's all about doing. The Buddha's own first teaching—on the noble eightfold path—was also a recommendation on what to do. This means that the teaching starts out with action as its basic principle. Actions are real. You choose your actions; you can change them. Those actions have life-shaping consequences, so you need to pay attention to what you're doing and to the consequences you're creating.

This leads to a series of shoulds and should-nots: actions you should do and actions you shouldn't if you want to put an end to suffering. The *if* there is crucial. The Buddha's shoulds are conditional in the sense that *if* you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you have to do. He's not forcing anything on you. But he is giving you guidance, and his guidance is categorical, i.e., true across the board. As he said, our normal reaction to suffering is bewilderment and a search. The bewilderment is that we don't know why we're suffering. Why is this happening? What can we do? If you don't believe in the principle of human action, you stay bewildered.

There were people who, in the Buddha's time, taught that human action is powerless. The Buddha rarely went out of his way to seek out other people to

argue with them, but he did go to argue with those who taught doctrines that basically left you without any hope for making a difference in the present moment—either by teaching that everything is the result of past action or everything is a result of the will of a creator or that everything is totally without cause. Those kinds of teaching, he said, leave you bewildered because they leave no grounds for a should or should not. If everything is determined, there's nothing you can do. If there's no connection between cause and effect, then no matter what you do, you can't have an impact on anything. You're lost. You have no recourse when suffering comes up.

So the Buddha's teaching you what to do when you suffer so that you're no longer bewildered and you don't have to continue suffering. And in that way, his teaching is a gift. As with any gift, when you receive it, you want to make good use of it. You don't want to just throw it away. You learn to be grateful for the generosity of the person who gave it and try to put it to the best use possible.

So what is the best use possible? You start by looking at your own actions because that's where the teaching is aimed. You look at the results of the actions you're doing right now to see if there's any connection between what you're doing and the fact that there's suffering in the mind.

This is why the Buddha says that uncertainty is overcome by looking at skillful and unskillful qualities in the mind. To begin with, you're focusing your attention on the most important issue in life, which is what sort of impact your actions are having, and particularly what kind of impact your mind states are having. After all, the source of action is in the mind. If you're uncertain about different mental qualities, then watch. Try developing goodwill; try being generous; try observing the precepts. See what kind of impact these qualities have on your life.

At the same time, try to develop the qualities that allow you to judge these things in fairness and with accuracy. Try to be mindful; try to be alert. Mindfulness is what connects cause and effect. If you don't have any mindfulness—i.e., if you can't remember what you did—you're not going to be able to figure out how this feeling of pain or this feeling of pleasure is related to actions you did a while back and have forgotten about. So you try to keep in mind what you've been doing. If you see any suffering coming up in your experience, try to trace it back. "What action is this related to? What kind of attitude is this related to?" The fact that there's pain in the body is a normal

part of life, but the fact that there's a pain in the mind is unnecessary. It doesn't have to be there. So what's causing the pain in the mind? If you can trace it back to an action—physical, verbal, or mental—then you've got a handle on things. You can end your uncertainty; you can end your bewilderment.

Of course, this requires alertness as well: that you really are paying attention to what you're doing. All too many of us don't. We go through life just going through the motions without looking carefully at our intentions. If you ask most people why they did something, they have to cast back and often they can't think of why so they invent a why. But if your alertness was shaky to begin with, that "why" is really unreliable. So you really want to be alert to what you're doing, i.e., to what you're intending right now. The more alert you are to your actions, the more you'll be able to remember what you've done. This is why mindfulness and alertness go together.

Then you combine these two qualities with the Buddha's shoulds and shouldn'ts. That's what ardency is all about. When the Buddha gave a categorical teaching about skillful and unskillful actions, he didn't just say that the distinction between the two is a categorical truth. The categorical truth is that unskillful things should be abandoned and skillful things should be developed. Again there's a should there. There's a recommended course of action. As you actually pursue that course of action with a sense of interest, of a desire to know, that's ardency. You're bringing all three of these qualities together: mindfulness, alertness, and ardency.

In the beginning, you develop these qualities as you follow the precepts. This is one of the reasons why the precepts come so early in many of the Buddha's teachings. In the noble eightfold path, for example, he talks about right speech, right action, and right livelihood before he talks about meditation. In his graduated discourse, virtue follows right after generosity. The reason for this is that when you're trying to develop virtue, you have to look at the things you're doing in your day-to-day life. This is how you develop your mindfulness and alertness. If you see that you're causing any harm, you try to drop what you're doing so as to stop that harm. That's how you develop ardency. Fortunately, the Buddha doesn't force you to experiment with every possible course of action, to see whether or not it's harmless. He gives you guidance. He says across the board that you don't want to kill, you don't want to steal, you don't want to have illicit sex, you don't want to lie, and you don't want to take intoxicants.

That last one is important because, as he said, we're already intoxicated with youth, we're intoxicated with health, we're intoxicated with beauty, we're intoxicated with life. The mind is already drunk. You don't want to add any more intoxication on top of that because you won't be able to develop the mindfulness and alertness you need in order to see things clearly and judge your actions fairly.

So you try to hold to these precepts and see what impact they have on your life. That's the only way you're going to come to any kind of certainty. And it's the only way you're going to lead a life that provides a good container for the practice. You see this so many times on retreats when people come in off the street to spend a whole week just being with their breath. If they have any unskillful behavior in their past, it's going to come up at some point or another in the retreat.

I myself haven't been to many meditation retreats but I do remember one in particular where, halfway through the retreat, one guy just broke down and started sobbing deeply in the middle of the afternoon. It went on for about ten, fifteen minutes. I found it very disturbing. But everybody else in the room was sitting there quietly as if nothing were happening. I learned later that this is a normal occurrence on retreats. It turned out this particular person had been a cocaine dealer and some of the stuff that he'd been engaged in while selling cocaine was coming up in his awareness.

I was also told that this happens on modern meditation retreats all the time: People come in with no background in virtue, and the stillness of the retreat provides a space for their remorse to suddenly erupt. This may provide a moment of catharsis, but not much more. If you have big wounds in your life caused by your misbehavior, it's very difficult for the mind to settle down and really be mindful and alert with enough stability to see things as they're actually happening and to direct your attention in a wise direction.

So the principle of virtue is very important, both as a container for the practice and as basic training in mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. These are the qualities that eventually you're going to bring to the body in and of itself, or feelings or mind states or mental qualities in and of themselves. But to come to those frames of reference with any solidity, you need to have practice with these three qualities in your daily life. So remember to stick by the precepts and watch over your behavior. Be alert to see when you might be breaking a precept. If you feel any temptation to break it, develop the quality of ardency,

trying to figure out how not to.

Most often the problem is that a good half of the mind wants to break the precept. So even though there are lots of skills that the Buddha recommends for holding to the precepts—learning how to say No to our greed, No to our anger, No to our delusion—we apply those teachings in only a half-hearted way. Then we say that the Buddha's recommendations are not working, so we go and give in to the temptation. But the actual problem is that we haven't given the teachings a fair chance. And the result of this half-heartedness is that we stay half-minded and bewildered. We wonder: Is the Buddha really right about skillful behavior? If you try to behave skillfully and all you do is find yourself getting really tense about it, is it really all that skillful?

Well, the real question is: Why are you getting tense? Is this the mind's way of looking for an excuse not to stick with skillful behavior? There are ways of sticking with the precepts and staying perfectly relaxed around them. After all, the mind is in a state of normalcy when it's not killing, not stealing, not engaging in all these other unskillful forms of behavior. So why are you tense in refraining from these actions? Are you trying to make them unattractive to yourself? It's only when you're really true with yourself that you're going to see the truth, and this is what it comes down to.

Ajaan Lee made this point many times, as did Ajaan Fuang. The reason we're uncertain is because we're not looking truly at what we're doing. There are things we hide from ourselves, things we've done that we don't want to admit to ourselves. We've acted on intentions that we don't like to own up to. This is what keeps us bewildered. The only way out of this bewilderment is to finally admit to ourselves that, yeah, we are causing suffering. This is what we keep running up against. There's suffering going on and it's related to our behavior. You want to learn to get past all the mental subterfuges and elaborate excuses you can give to keep on engaging in the behavior that part of you likes but also knows is not really skillful. When you've decided you've had enough, that's when you're really ready for the practice.

So suffering is what causes us to be bewildered but it's also what reminds us that we want to stop being bewildered. Otherwise, we're just going to keep banging our heads against the wall of that suffering. That's where the other reaction comes in: the search. Maybe there's a way out; maybe there's somebody who knows how to put an end to suffering. The Buddha stands ready to give you his advice. It's simply up to you as to when you're ready to take it.

Less is More

July 2, 2009

We spread thoughts of goodwill for all the world, that we don't wish anyone any harm. We wish that all beings could find happiness. So why are we sitting here with our eyes closed? Why aren't we going out there, making people happy?

Because happiness is something that has to come from within. It's based on being skillful in the way you act, which includes not only your physical actions, but also your speech and the actions of your mind—and in particular, the act of intention. This is because it's through our intentions that we shape the world we experience, along with the amount of pleasure or pain we take out of that experience. To formulate intentions that really do lead to happiness is a skill. And because it's a skill, nobody else can master the skill for you; you can't master the skill for anyone else. You can give other people advice, you can show them to some extent how to do things, but for them to find happiness requires that they take the issue of happiness seriously, that they learn how to be skillful in their approach to happiness. If you're going to give them reliable advice or set a reliable example, you yourself need to learn how to be skillful, too.

So, both for the sake of our own true happiness and for the true happiness of others, this is why we're sitting here meditating. We're training the mind to be very attentive, continually attentive to what it's doing, so that it can learn how to do it skillfully. This means that even though there is the quest for peace, the quest for stillness in the mind, it's not just peace and stillness for its own sake. It's for the sake of understanding what we're doing to cause suffering, and what we can do to stop it. That's the purpose of our understanding.

Last week I was teaching up in Canada, and the question came up: Isn't the purpose of all this practice to find the ultimate truth about things? And the answer is No. We're trying to find a particular truth that's useful for a higher purpose, the purpose of true happiness. It's truth with a purpose. After all, there are many truths of the world. We can talk about how lasting things are, and in some ways it's true. We can talk about how ephemeral they are, and in some ways that's true as well. We can talk about the happiness in relationships, and there really is happiness in relationships. But we can also

talk about the suffering in relationships, and there's a lot of that, too. The question is, what use comes from focusing on which truths? Where do they lead you?

Once, when I was first staying with Ajaan Fuang, there was another young monk who had ordained at his fiancée's request. She wanted to make sure her husband had had some training as a monk before they got married. So he spent two weeks out there at the monastery and found that he liked the life of a monk a lot more than he had expected. When the night came for his parents and fiancée to pick him up and take him back to disrobe in Bangkok, Ajaan Fuang could sense that he was getting a little reluctant to go. So that night he gave a talk on how we're not born alone. We're born from our parents. We owe a debt to our parents, and we need to repay that debt.

A few days later, I was beginning to get concerned about my own debt to my father, and Ajaan Fuang said, "When we come to this world, we come alone. Nobody comes with us. Nobody hired us to come."

Two different truths: both true, and the question is learning how to use those truths properly in the right context.

Which means that the *uses* of these truths are what's important. The ultimate use is finding out how we create a lot of unnecessary stress and suffering for ourselves in spite of ourselves, and how we can put an end to it. That's why we train the mind.

To see this clearly, we have to get the mind still. Get the mind with one object, so it can settle down and have a good solid foundation that doesn't shift around all the time. The more you shift around, the less you see. You might think that the more territory you cover, the more sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations you'll see. But you don't see them clearly. And the memory of what you do see is very impermanent.

When you try to gather up that kind of wealth—the wealth of memories and experiences—you find that it doesn't stay with you. It's like buying a huge shipload of lettuce, thinking it'll supply you with all the lettuce you'll need for the rest of your life. And, of course, the lettuce begins to rot pretty fast and after a while you can't use it. You then have the burden of trying to throw it away.

So you need to get a different kind of knowledge, the kind of knowledge that doesn't change. You find that it doesn't require you to know a lot of things

outside, but it does require you to know your mind very thoroughly. How does your mind process things? That's where the stress and suffering come from.

The Buddha explains the causes of stress and suffering in a very elaborate sequence. It starts with ignorance and goes through many different factors. But one obvious point to notice is that many of the factors come prior to your sensory experience. In other words, the issue is all about what you *bring* to the experience. That's what makes all the difference. This is why we train the mind: so that it can bring the right qualities, the right intentions, the right *at*tention—paying attention to where there's stress, and what can you do to put an end to it, by focusing on what you did to cause it. That kind of knowledge is useful in all circumstances, for it enables you to bring the right attitudes, the right qualities to bear, no matter what the situation.

So we start out here with our eyes closed, sitting still, to get the mind to settle down so that we can see it, so that we can develop some of these skills. But these skills are not just to be used when sitting here with our eyes closed. They're for us to bring to any situation no matter what, no matter how complex, no matter how large and complicated. If we can bring the right attitudes to those situations, we don't have to suffer. We don't have to cause suffering for other people. They may not like what we say or do, because we can't have any control over people's likes and dislikes, which are pretty unreliable. But we can be firm in our intent not to cause anyone any harm.

This is the kind of knowledge and these are the kind of truths we're looking for: the truth of what you're doing right now. What is your intention right now? Is it a skillful intention? And *skillful*doesn't mean just good, because you can have good intentions for others, but you can also have a lot of delusion at the same time, in which case your intention is not really skillful. When you're looking for skillful intentions, you're looking for intentions that aren't founded on greed, aren't founded on aversion, and aren't founded on delusion. That's what you're working for.

That means you have to start with something immediately present and really obvious—like the breath. Just be with the breath as it comes in; be with the breath as it goes out. Part of the mind will complain that there's not much happening, but the more space you give to the breath, the more you see what's there. In other words, you don't want to clutter up your mind with other thoughts. You have to realize in this case that less is more. The fewer things you're thinking about, the more you'll see right here, right now.

So whatever other concerns you may have about your situation at home, at work, or the world outside, put those concerns aside for the time being. Be as fully aware of the body, as fully aware of the breath as you can right now. Think of the breath as a whole-body process. It's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the flow of energy throughout the body, part of which is related to the flow of the blood and to the sense of aliveness in your nerves. Try to be sensitive to the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. Notice if there's any tension or tightness in any part of the body. Allow it to relax. If there's a sense of nourishment and refreshment, allow that to expand. Ask yourself: What would be the most refreshing way to breathe right now? See how the body responds. And stick with it, trying to stay on top of the body's breath-needs and providing whatever you sense it needs with each and every breath.

Because it's in sticking with the breath that the mind develops some steadiness. Once your gaze is steady, it can begin to see other movements in the mind as they happen. But for the time being, you don't want to pay them any attention. You want to pay attention more to the movements of the breath. If there are any thoughts coming up, you can just let them go, let them go, let them go. Again, less is more. The fewer the thoughts cluttering up your awareness, the more you'll sense how the breath can fill the range of your awareness. The more sensitive you are, the more likely the mind is to settle down, to have a sense of ease and wellbeing right here, right now. Comb through any tangles of tension in the body, any knots of blockage in the breath. The more demanding you are in not allowing the tension to stay, the more subtleties you'll see. It's like being the princess who couldn't even have a pea under many mattresses—the difference here being that if you sense any little peas under the mattress, you take them out.

That's the work at the beginning of the meditation: ironing things out, smoothing things out, asking questions about the breath. What kind of breathing would feel good now? And what would feel good *now?* Because sometimes you can breathe in a way that stays steadily the same for long periods of time, and the body feels fine. At other times, one type of breathing might feel good for a couple breaths and then not so good with the next breath, so you've got to change. The important thing is that you stay with the breath as your main topic, to develop what is called singleness of preoccupation, which means both that you hold to one preoccupation, the breath, and you make it single in the sense

that it's the one thing that fills the whole range of your awareness, with breath energy flowing through the body, even around the body. Think of it as a cocoon around the body, protecting you from outside energies. See how long you can maintain that perception.

It's an act of balancing. If you've ever noticed people walking across a tightrope, you notice that they don't stay perfectly balanced all the time. They shift a little bit to the right, a little bit to the left, and then they correct, like those old-fashioned scales that swing back and forth before finally coming into balance. If something tips it in one direction, the scale corrects itself, swinging back and forth until it's in balance again. The ability to regain your balance is what's going to keep you here.

Our mind is often like the mind of an addict, the sort of person who says, "I've been smoking pot for the last five years but now I'm totally clean, totally beyond that. I'll never be tempted to smoke again." That kind of attitude is going to get him back into smoking pot pretty soon. The way to stay away from your addiction is to realize that there are certain things that attract you, so you have to be on your guard, armed with antidotes for every temptation. You need to have antidotes to bring yourself back into balance. So realize that there's always a possibility of falling out of balance, but you can master the skills that can get you back in.

That's what the directed thought and evaluation at the beginning of right concentration are all about. If you find the mind slipping off the breath, you can get it back right away. If it slips off in another direction, you get it back right away. You keep regaining your balance no matter how much it wobbles. After a while, things finally settle down. You get more and more absorbed in the breath. There's a greater sense of oneness. A greater sense of concentration, composure, assurance that this is where you really want to be, and it's all right where it is right now. At that point, you don't have to adjust or analyze the breath any more. Just stay with "full body breath, whole body breath, aware, aware." It's as if the awareness and the body and the breath penetrate one another. There's a strong sense of oneness. It's from this oneness that we can begin to see things clearly.

The important thing right now is just to make sure that your foundation is strong, and that you do whatever is needed to maintain and regain that sense of balance. You may find the mind going into its old habits of trying to gather up this, gather up that, so remember: Less is more. Just the breath. Just the breath.

You don't need anything else. If you give a lot of attention to the breath, you begin to see its potentials and can take advantage of them. You find that a sense of ease and wellbeing with the breath can do a lot more for you than any amount of status, material gain, praise, outside pleasures—any of the ways of the world. A sense of ease and wellbeing that come from within: This is really all you need because it fully nourishes the mind right now.

A well-nourished mind gives rise to more mindfulness and ultimately to the knowledge that can put an end to defilement—which is an even greater example of the case that less is more. The fewer your defilements, the more freedom you have. As the Buddha said, when he gained awakening, he dwelled with an unrestricted awareness, free from any attachments, free from any constriction. It's the greatest wealth there is.

Rehab Work

January 16, 2011

Take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths and see how that feels. If it feels good, keep it up. If it feels too strenuous, try another rhythm of breathing: shorter, more shallow, heavier, or lighter. Just pose this question in the mind: "What kind of breathing would feel good now?" You'll notice that the breathing process is not just air coming in and out of the nose. The body has to move. The movement of the body is what we're interested in. That's also a kind of breath. It's the energy that allows the air to come in and out.

Notice where you feel that energy: where it feels good, where it doesn't feel so good. If it doesn't feel good, you can change it. Just keep asking that question, "What would feel good right now?" Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, try to get a sense of exactly how long a breath feels just right. You want to stay with the breathing process as consistently as you can so that you can notice the little signals that tell you things like, "Now the breath is getting too long," or "It wasn't deep enough just now, so let's try a little bit deeper this time." Only when you watch continually like this can you can actually notice these things. If your attention skips off someplace else, you miss a lot of the signals.

You're trying to stay with the breath, but don't stay just through force of will. Try to stay with a sense of curiosity. You're exploring and learning new habits. You may discover that the way you've been breathing has not been good for the body. Some parts of the body seem to be starved of breath energy; other parts are overworked. If you find a part of the body that's been overworked, let it relax and think of each breath coming in directly to that part to give it more energy. You may have to adjust your posture a bit, so that the body is more balanced, not leaning to the left, not leaning to the right, not stooped over, not tilting back. Try to sensitize yourself to what the body is doing in the process of breathing and to what you can do to make it a more healing process. After all, the breath is what keeps the body alive. If the breathing goes really well, it'll do more than just keep the body alive. It can actually be healing for the body.

The Buddha often compares his Dhamma to medicine. He's a doctor. The medicine is not a chemical compound. It's more like a rehab process. You're

rehabilitating your body. You're rehabilitating your mind—because the mind has its diseases, too, you know: the diseases of greed, aversion, and delusion. We wound ourselves with things we do under the influence of these unskillful mental qualities. Although we may have picked up habits from the outside, in the same way that we can pick up germs from the outside, the act of choosing to follow the habits that others have modeled for us was *our* choice. Our resistance was down. So the diseases we have in the mind are self-inflicted. To heal the mind, you don't just let it sit there and do nothing, or be nonreactive. Again, think of this as rehab work. If you sprain your ankle, you can't just sit there and leave it immobile. That'll make it worse. You've got to find exercises to keep it mobile and to keep it from freezing into unhealthy positions.

This is why, when the Buddha teaches meditation, he doesn't say simply to be nonreactive. He does want you to learn patience, so you can sit with things for a while and watch them, but not just to leave it at that. You watch things carefully and patiently so that you can see when you have any unhealthy habits, any unhealthy ways of thinking, unhealthy ways of perceiving things. By noticing them, you can change them. That's why he gives you suggestions for different ways of looking at things and different ways of exercising the mind.

He had a conversation one time with some monks, telling them it would be good if they practiced more breath meditation. One monk said, "I already practice breath meditation." The Buddha asked, "What kind of breath meditation do you practice?" The monk replied, "I put aside thoughts of the past. I don't hanker after the future. I'm just very equanimous about what happens in the present moment as I breathe in, as I breathe out." The Buddha responded, "Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, but that's not the kind that gives the best results." Then, he taught the monks the sixteen steps of breath meditation.

If you look at those sixteen steps, you notice a lot of them involve training you to breathe in a certain way: to pay attention to, emphasize, and give rise to certain feelings; to give rise to certain mental states, and to give rise to mental qualities that are healing. For instance, once you get in touch with how the breath feels, try to be aware of the whole body so that you can notice the impact of the breath on the body. If you notice that it's too strenuous in some spots, or you're putting too much force on some spots, try to calm it down. You try to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of fullness and ease. You begin

to notice how the feelings created by focusing on the breath have an impact on the mind. You also notice how the perceptions of what's happening in the breathing process have an impact both on the mind and on the way you breathe. You try to calm all of that down.

Then you look at the state of your mind. Is it steady enough? How is its energy level? If its energy level is low, try to gladden it. If it's too frenetic, try to steady it. If you notice that the mind is thinking about or focusing on things in a way that's burdensome, try to free it from those burdens. In other words, you're doing rehab work. You're exercising the mind through playing with the process of breathing. You're getting to know the process of breathing really thoroughly, and through that you're getting to see how the process of fabrication shapes your present experience.

In the Buddha's analysis of causation, he talks about how ignorance has an impact on the process of fabrication, and the three types of fabrication—bodily, verbal, and mental—then have an impact on how we receive input through the senses. One of the ways we fabricate our experience is through the way we breathe. That's called bodily fabrication. When we breathe with ignorance, it leads to suffering and to stress. But if we breathe with full awareness and alertness, it can alleviate that stress. So, what we're doing now is bringing more knowledge and awareness to the process of breath-fabrication. By exercising all the possibilities of how you could think about and perceive the breath, you can discover what's most healing for you. This way we're also exercising the mind by exploring the process of breath-fabrication together with mental fabrication: how we fabricate feelings and perceptions, and how those feelings and perceptions shape the state of the mind. We're taking a proactive stance. Sometimes this means just watching for a while and not doing anything so that you can see things more clearly. But once you see things clearly, then when you see you're doing something uncomfortable or harmful, you can change your habits.

As you develop sensitivity from this exploration, it can then be applied to other habits and ways of thinking and acting that are harmful either to yourself or to others as well. You're continuing to do rehab work on your own mind, learning how to think and act in new ways.

There was a group of ascetics during the Buddha's time, called the Jains. They reasoned that people suffer because of their actions. Therefore, people should just stop acting. By learning how to stop acting, being totally

nonreactive, that would be the way to release. The Buddha pointed out that it's not healing for the mind to simply stop acting. It doesn't release or free the mind. It just freezes things. His path is more proactive by teaching you to examine your actions in the present and, wherever they're causing harm, to learn to act in a new way, a way that ultimately does lead to the end of action. This new way of acting also leads to the end of intention, but it does this through understanding and through the mastery of skills: how to breathe, how to perceive things, and how to think about things. These are the skills with which you heal yourself.

As you look back on your life, you're bound to see lots of times when you acted in ways that were hurtful to yourself and to others. What you're trying to create now as you meditate is a place where you can do healing work: Do healing actions, think healing thoughts, think healing perceptions. You start by training your thoughts or perceptions and learning how to breathe in a healing way. This is rehab work for the mind; it's rehab work for the way you approach experience in general.

So the Buddha wasn't the kind of doctor who would have you lie in bed and remain immobile. He also wasn't the kind of doctor who would just give you a shot and send you home. He was more like a physical therapist teaching you new ways to walk, new ways to hold your body as you sit. Further than that, of course, he teaches you new ways to breathe, new ways to think, new ways to perceive things. As you develop these new habits, you find that the habits themselves are healing.

So think of the breath work, the meditation, as rehab work. Effort is involved. You have to learn how to think in new ways, how to ask questions, and how to look with new eyes at what's going on. You have to notice how you're shaping your experience and then try out new, more healing ways of shaping that experience. As you develop these new skills, you find that they take you to true health. That's one of the Buddha's names for *nibbana:* true health for the mind, a mind that's been healed, because it knows how to do its own healing work.

Kindfulness

May 1, 2011

As you train the mind, focusing on the breath, allowing the breath to be comfortable, trying to become friends with the breath, it's a very direct way of showing goodwill to yourself and to the people around you. Goodwill for yourself in the sense that you learn how to develop a source of happiness that comes from within. Your happiness is less dependent on outside conditions. And this is why it's an act of goodwill for others, in that this happiness doesn't have to take anything away from anyone else.

Now in the beginning, as you're learning the ropes, it's very helpful to have conducive outside conditions. As with any skill, you want to learn the basics with as few distractions as possible, along with a supportive environment, and helpful people to inspire you, to encourage you, to give you advice. So in the beginning, this happiness is very much dependent on conditions.

But as you get more and more skilled, you find that you can carry the sense of being well-centered—having an awareness that fills the body, that feels at ease with the body, feels at ease with the breath—into all kinds of situations. Where in the past you felt threatened, nervous, or ill at ease, now you have a solid center. You're grounded and you're taking care of the mind's need to feed.

It's something we don't often think about but it's an important question to ask yourself: Where is your mind feeding? What kinds of things is it looking for to give itself strength, to give itself pleasure, to give itself nourishment? All too often, you find you're feeding on the words and actions of other people, things around you. Inside, you find yourself feeding on greed, feeding on anger, feeding on delusion. None of these things are good, healthy food.

But as you feed on the comfortable breath, it's not just the breath you're feeding on. You're also feeding on the good qualities you're developing in the mind as you stick with the breath: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment, goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. These are all good qualities to develop. As for the word *qualities* here, it's best to think of them as habits you develop in the mind. That's because it's more useful to think of the mind in terms of what it's *doing* than in

terms of what it *is*. In other words, if you think of your mind as a thing with particular characteristics—a narrow mind, a broad mind, a good mind, a bad mind—you find yourself stuck inside that particular characterization and it's hard to get out. But if you see it simply as a bundle of different activities, then an activity is something you can change. Just because you did something yesterday doesn't mean you have to do it again today. As you give the mind a better and better place to stay, a better place on which to base its activities—more solid, more reliable, more pleasurable—it's more likely to do the skillful thing because it's not so tempted to go out and get a quick fix, a quick bite to eat. That way you can trust your mind more and more.

This is probably the scariest thing in life: when you come across different situations where you sense that you can't trust yourself to do the skillful thing, where you're tempted to do something that's either harmful to yourself or harmful to others. But that's the way the mind is if it's dependent on conditions being a certain way. It behaves itself when things go well but not when they don't.

The Buddha once said he didn't trust the monks who behaved well only when there was good food, good clothing, good shelter, and good medicine available. As he said, he couldn't trust that they were really there for the practice. What would they do when the food wasn't so good or if there was a lack in the clothing, shelter, or medicine?

This is one of the ways in which the meditation is a gift to yourself: You learn that you can trust yourself more because you're more nourished and at ease in the present moment. You're more at ease with a greater sense of confidence, stability, and strength. And this is a wellbeing that has no drawbacks. Especially as you develop the mind further and further, you ultimately run across something that's not conditioned at all, not even by inside conditions. That's what the practice is aimed at: a dimension totally free from suffering, totally free from conditions, pure, unadulterated, trustworthy happiness. That's quite a gift.

On top of that, you're not the only one who benefits. That's the other side of the practice: You're showing goodwill for others. All aspects of the practice share in this quality of being good for both sides. You start with generosity, which obviously benefits other people, but you benefit as well. The mind grows larger, more expansive, more able to include other people in your consideration.

The same with the precepts: You refrain from harming other people. That means you have less remorse to deal with inside. If you're going around intentionally hurting this or that person, and then you sit down and try to make the mind quiet, these things just pop up in your awareness. When they pop up, you can do one of two things. On the one hand, you can deny that they happened or that they were wrong or that that person was worth anything, all of which makes your mind more and more narrow and rigid. Or, on the other hand, you can just sit there overcome with remorse, which is like sticking a knife in an open wound.

But if you make a practice of going through the day resolving not to harm other people regardless, then when you feel tempted to say something that's hurtful or untrue, you just hold your tongue. That, of all the precepts—the one against lying—is probably the most important and the most relevant all the time. There are not that many situations when we're tempted to kill or steal. Illicit sex, maybe; alcohol and drugs, maybe. But controlling your mouth: That's 24/7, except when you're asleep.

As you exercise more restraint over your mouth, you're showing more respect for yourself. As Ajaan Lee once said, you should bow down to your mouth every day. You went to all the trouble of developing the perfections that allow you to be born as a human being. You have a human mouth. It's not like the mouths of animals, which can say only a few things. You can say all kinds of things, so you want to use that mouth well. Think of all the effort that went into gaining it.

So when you've been observing the precepts, sticking with them as a promise you make to yourself, then as you sit down and meditate, there's less remorse. Instead, you have a sense that you're living in the world in a harmless way, with a light footprint, and you find it easier to live with yourself. In this way, other people benefit, and you benefit as well.

Even more with the meditation: We're working to overcome greed, anger, and delusion in the mind. We're learning to make ourselves more self-reliant —which means that other people will be less subject to our greed, anger, and delusion, and we'll have to lean on them less. As we develop mindfulness, concentration, discernment, compassion, these things can't help but spill over into the way we deal with other people.

The Buddha once told the story of two acrobats. The master acrobat got up on the end of a bamboo pole—apparently they would stick these poles up

vertically. He got up on top of the pole, had his assistant get up on his shoulders, and then told her, “Now, you look out after me and I’ll look out after you as we do our tricks on the bamboo pole, and that way we’ll come down safely.” And she said, “No, that won’t work. I have to look out after myself and you look after yourself, and that way we’ll help each other keep our balance on the pole.” In other words, by keeping your balance you’re helping other people keep their balance. And the Buddha said that in that particular case the assistant was the one who was right.

But there are other cases where, when looking out after other people, you’re looking out after yourself. As you develop kindfulness—excuse me, as you develop kindness and care in how you treat other people—you’re benefiting yourself. As you develop goodwill, patience, and harmlessness in the way you treat them, you’re benefiting yourself. As you develop good qualities in the mind as you meditate—persistence, dedication, mindfulness—you’re benefiting other people as well. So this is why this is a special practice. You’re developing a happiness that spreads around.

At the same time, this sense of wellbeing in the mind is what allows you to look at your actions in all fairness and see where they’re skillful and where they’re not. When the mind is feeling tired and hungry and weak, it doesn’t like to look at its mistakes—and as a result it’s not going to learn from them. You’re not going to learn from anything you won’t look at. But when you can develop this greater sense of wellbeing inside, you can reflect with more fairness and greater sensitivity on the areas where your actions either harmed yourself or harmed other people.

This simple principle of looking at things in terms of actions and results goes very deep in the practice. As I said earlier, when you think about the mind, don’t think about it as a thing or entity. Think of it as just lots and lots of actions. Look at the ways you think, the ways you focus on things, the ways you understand things, the ways you interpret things, the intentions you have, the ways you pay attention to things. These are all actions that might be skillful or not. As your sensitivity develops, you begin to see more and more where you’re acting in an unskillful way, thinking, interpreting, or intending in unskillful ways. Because you’re now coming from this settled place, you can begin to think more and more about how you can do things more skillfully. Keep doing this, and your sense of “skillful” will grow more and more refined.

Try to develop a sense of yourself as someone who’s always willing to

learn, especially from your mistakes. You don't beat yourself up over your mistakes. You try not to make mistakes so that you don't have the extra burden of looking back on blameworthy mistakes—i.e., ones where you knew better but went ahead with harmful behavior anyhow. But when you do make a mistake, you say, "Okay, that was a mistake. What can I learn from it?" You realize that beating yourself up extra hard is not going to compensate for something you did—and it's certainly not going to put you in a better position to do it skillfully the next time. The more you look at the events in the mind in this way, the more you see that what you thought were things or entities or inherent natures you couldn't change are actually actions.

Even your sense of self is a type of action. You identify with ideas, you identify with the body, you identify with your possessions, your relationships, your role outside in the world, and in each case that identification is a kind of mental activity. Because it's an activity, then the question becomes not, "Which self is the true me?" The question becomes, "When is the activity of having a sense of self skillful and when is it not?" You see that among the various selves you create, the ones that are more responsible, that are more careful, more willing to learn: Those are the ones you want to nurture.

In particular, the sense of self that's confident that it can do the practice: The Buddha strongly encourages you to foster that sense of self. The sense of self that wants true happiness: He says to honor that sense of self. Don't be a traitor to it. Heedfulness, restraint: These are all activities of wise selfing. They're things you want to develop.

As for the senses of self that say, "I just want my quick fix; I want my quick bite right now," those are selves you have to look askance at. Those are the ones you don't feed.

This is where the teaching on not-self comes in. You begin to realize that just because something comes up in the mind doesn't mean you have to identify with it. After all, there's a lot of activity in the mind that comes simply from the force of past kamma, your past actions. And that's not your kamma right now. Your kamma right now is what you *do* with those things. You have the choice to go with them or not. Try to make the most of that choice, because as you exercise that freedom, you find more and more what freedom means in the mind.

This goes deep into the meditation. You have to keep this in mind all the way to the most refined levels, because when the mind gets very still, very

centered, very spacious, there's a strong sense of oneness, a strong sense that you've arrived at the ground of being, an awareness that doesn't seem to be touched by anything. It's very easy to mistake that for some sort of metaphysical principle, with the sense that "this is the way things are": "Being" with a capital B. But even there, the Buddha has you recognize it as a kind of activity. It's actually a doing.

As he once said, the highest state of oneness or non-duality is a sense of the non-duality of consciousness, a sense of knowing, knowing, knowing that permeates everything. It's a skillful state but it's not what we're here for because it's not the end of suffering. You have to learn to question it in terms of activities: What were the activities that brought you there? What did you do, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or not, that gave rise to that? What are you doing to keep it going? Even though it's subtle, there has to be an activity to keep it going. Even just the perception, the label there: That's an activity. To what extent is that activity still stressful? Can you drop whatever's causing that stress? These are the questions the Buddha has you ask, looking at everything as actions, actions you want to do skillfully, actions you want to do or stop doing for the sake of putting an end to suffering.

In other words, this line of questioning is motivated by goodwill, motivated by compassion for yourself and for other people—always realizing that the more skillful you become in training the mind, learning how to act with more precision, more skill, more finesse, then the less you suffer—and the less the people around you suffer. You have more positive things to share.

As the Buddha once said, there are only two things he taught: suffering or stress, and the end of suffering or stress. To get to the end involves understanding the principle of action: what you're doing, where it's skillful, where it's not, what you can learn from where it's skillful and where it's not. That way, you can ultimately reach the dimension where suffering ends, or as the Buddha says, you see it with the body or touch it with the body. In other words, it's a totally full experience—it's not just something in your head—where your happiness doesn't have to depend on any conditions at all.

That's when you can trust yourself. You don't need to feed on anything outside anymore. You've got something so solid that it doesn't need to be nourished. And it doesn't depend on conditions; it doesn't depend on space and time. So it causes no harm to anybody at all. As with all aspects of the practice, it's a gift to yourself and to others. Once you've experienced this, you

can speak with more confidence about what really works, how the mind can be trained, what's skillful in training the mind, what's not skillful in training the mind. You can trust yourself, and other people can trust you more as well.

So this practice is not only a gift, it's also something good to give yourself to—because it gives so much back. You look at the world and there are so many things that clamor for your time and attention. But if you ask yourself, "If I gave myself to that, what would I be left with?" And you realize: not much. But this is one training, one practice that more than lives up to its promise. So give it a serious try.

As Days & Nights Fly Past

January 1, 2010

Try to get the body in a comfortable position. Try to keep your back straight—but not ramrod straight. Comfortably straight. Face forward. Close your eyes. Put your hands in your lap, your right hand on top of your left. And there you are.

The next step is to put the mind in a comfortable position, and that takes more time.

First start with thoughts that are comfortable to think. "May I be happy, may all living beings be happy," as in the chant we chanted just now. That's a comfortable thought to think. And think about the possibility of a true happiness: a happiness that doesn't harm you, doesn't harm anybody else, because it comes from within. Those are good thoughts to think as well. True happiness is possible and it doesn't have to harm anyone—unlike most of the pleasures of the world, where if someone gains something, somebody else has to lose. And not just lose: Some people actually are harmed by other people's search for happiness. But here's a search for happiness where nobody gets harmed.

Where do you find that happiness? You find it within.

So the next step is to focus on your breath, because the breath is a good anchor for keeping the mind in the present. It's also what makes the present livable in terms of getting the mind to settle comfortably into the body in the present moment. The breath is the part of the body that's most changeable and lies most under your control. It can have an effect on whether you're going to be sitting here in pain or sitting here in pleasure.

Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. See how that feels. If it feels good, keep it up; if not, you can change to shorter breathing or longer breathing. Heavier or lighter; deeper or more shallow; faster or slower; broader or more focused. There are lots of different ways you can breathe. Experiment to see what the range of breathing can do for the body.

It's like getting a new stereo. You fiddle with the dials to see how they affect the sound, what kind of noises you can get out of your stereo. Then you finally decide on the settings you prefer. And you can do the same with the breath. Nobody's here to tell you that one way of breathing has to be better

than another. You get to choose. And in choosing, you develop your own powers of discernment. As you begin to see that some ways of breathing feel good for a while but after a while they don't feel so good, well, you get to change. You try other ways.

You also notice how you think about the breath. What kind of concept do you use to picture the breathing process to yourself? When you breathe in, what's actually happening? You know there's air coming in and out of the lungs, but as you begin to get more sensitive to how you experience the process, you begin to see there's also a sense of energy that flows through the body. And that has a huge impact on how you're going to be sitting here for the rest of the hour. If the energy is allowed to flow smoothly and freely, you're more likely to be here with a sense of comfort. In fact, when the Buddha talks about the mind settling in, it's to develop pleasure and rapture. It's right here, in the way the breath energy flows, that the pleasure and the rapture are going to appear. So you work with that.

Once you find a sense of ease, what can you do to maintain that ease? You can't clamp down on it. But you can't take a cavalier attitude toward it, either. It's something you want to protect. You have to be very observant as to how you're experiencing the body in the present moment and to what ways you can experiment with that experience. Notice which ways of breathing create a sense of ease; which ways of breathing destroy that sense of ease; which ways of breathing, which ways of focusing on the breath energy, help to maintain a sense of ease and allow it to grow to a sense of fullness, so that you feel full, full, full, all the way through the in-breath and all the way through the out. Don't try to squeeze the energy out as you breathe out, because that prevents the sense of fullness and rapture from arising.

So, this allows us to sit here, the body comfortably in position, the mind comfortably in position. And that in and of itself can be healing: healing to the body, healing to the mind. Learn how to maintain that.

But it's more than just healing. As we all know, there's another side to the meditation, which is gaining insight. Maintaining the sense of comfort is actually what makes the insight possible. Why is that? Because a lot of the issues that we're going to try to gain insight into are not very comfortable to think about. Normally we approach them with a sense of desperation, fear, and anxiety, and so we can't really see them for what they are.

Like that chant we had just now: aging, illness, death, separation. These

are things we don't like to think about. Most people take an ostrich attitude toward them: that if you bury your head in the sand, they won't see you and they'll go away. But that obviously doesn't work. The body grows old, even as you're sitting there. It grows sick. All those germs come floating to you through the air. And, of course, the body's going to die someday. This is something we all know. Death is one of the things that's totally certain and yet most of us act as if it's not going to happen—because we don't know how to think about it. We can't approach it with a sense of comfort, so we try to avoid it. But what the Buddha's having us do as we meditate is to develop a sense of comfort in body and mind so that you can look at these things from a balanced and unthreatened perspective.

Even though they're inevitable, and potentially very painful, you don't have to suffer from them. That's an important point. For most of us, just the idea of aging, illness, and death causes us to suffer. Even more so, the actuality: As you grow old, you find there are things you can't do anymore. Your body simply won't let you. When you're sick, you're even more debilitated. And when you die, the body doesn't come and say, "I'm going to die on such and such a date. Get everything ready in time. Is this a convenient time to go? If not, we can negotiate." It doesn't discuss that at all. If it's going to go, it's going to go.

The question is, how do you learn not to suffer from those things? And the answer is that you develop qualities of mind, and you also develop a certain attitude toward life. This is crucial. You need to gain a sense of what's really important in this limited span of time that we have when the body's still healthy, still relatively young, still functioning—at least to some extent—and still alive. What's really worth doing in this life?

There's a question the Buddha has the monks reflect on every day and it's not just for monks. It's for everybody who practices. It's: "What am I becoming as days and nights fly past?" This is a question he has you ask yourself every day: "What am I becoming as days and nights fly past?" It's an interesting question. We all know about the teachings on not-self and going beyond becoming, but here the Buddha's asking you to reflect on yourself and what your self is becoming. This is because there are areas in the practice where it is useful to develop a healthy sense of self, a skillful sense of self. This reflection is meant to develop that skillful sense of self through heedfulness, because all skillful qualities in mind come from being heedful.

For a lot of people, as days and nights fly past, all they can think about is, “How can I cram in as many pleasures and memories as possible? I want to make sure I’m not missing out on anything.” Of course, when you do one thing, you’re missing out on something else. Like packing a suitcase: The more you cram in, the more other things are going to spill out. If you take the attitude that the value of life lies in having lots of memories, well, we all know what the process of memory is like. We stash away certain ideas, and as they get brought up from the mind to reflect on, each time you put them back in the mind they get changed. After a while your memories get distorted and deformed. So what’s left? A lot of lies the mind is telling itself about the past. They may look like gold, but they’re fake.

Years back, in 1997, I went to Alaska, and then I went back again in 2005. And even allowing for the fact that things do change, still I found that many of my memories from 1997 were impossible. Things I’d remembered from my first trip just couldn’t have been that way, in terms of sites I had seen, places I had noticed, details that had struck me before. I went back and realized they couldn’t have happened. And so you begin to wonder about devoting your life to gathering up memories. After a while, the memories are totally worthless.

So the Buddha doesn’t have you reflect on, “What am I gathering up as days and nights fly past?” but, “What am I becoming?” What kind of person are you becoming? What qualities of mind are you developing? Are you developing laziness? Are you developing complacency? Or are you developing heedfulness? Are you developing mindfulness? Because as the Buddha said, the things we tend to think about form an inclination for the mind—or as we would say, ruts for the mind: ways in which you tend to act, ways in which you tend to think, that as you keep repeating them become harder and harder to leave.

Each time you go over the same pattern, you’re creating a deeper and deeper rut in the mind. Do you like the ruts you’ve been creating for yourself? Do you like the way you tend to act? This is important. They talk about people who lose their memory as they get older, but many of their personality traits are still there. If you’ve been developing kindness, compassion, and mindfulness, then even when your memories are gone, you’ll still have something valuable. But if you’ve been developing your irritability, if you’ve been developing anger or selfishness, then those are the qualities you’ll be left with. Do they have any value? Are they worth packing up and taking with you

as you move on?

In Thailand, I knew a number of meditators who had gone through brain damage, either through an accident or through surgery. One of them, one of Ajaan Fuang's students, had been through an operation on his heart. Apparently the doctors had clamped off the wrong arteries during the operation, and when he came out of the operation he realized that his brain wasn't functioning the way it had been before. But he'd been developing the mindfulness and alertness through his meditation that enabled him to handle the slow recovery with a lot more skill and grace than most people would.

So are you developing the mental skills you're going to need as the body begins to malfunction? Or are you developing mental attitudes and habits that will make things worse? This is important to reflect on. It gives you a handle on how best to approach aging, illness, and death. There are things you can do in preparation.

One of the reasons most people don't like to think about these things is because they feel there's nothing they can do to prepare. When illness comes, we have to give the body over to the doctors. The doctors will take care of the problem—sometimes. As for death, well, death just happens. You can't really do anything about it. You can't prepare, so you might as well not think about it. That's what many people think, but it's not the case at all. You *can* prepare. There's a skillful way to die, and there are many, many unskillful ways to die. They all depend on the mental qualities you've developed and what you've been becoming.

This is one aspect of the practice where it's useful to think in terms of who you are, what you're becoming. It's a skillful use of the sense of self. It's not the case that every time you have a sense of self it's going to cause you to suffer. Some ways of thinking about yourself are actually part of the path. Toward the end of the path, you won't be needing them anymore. But when you're choosing what to do, you need a strong sense of what's worth doing and what's not—what you'll be benefitting from down the line, what you'll be suffering from down the line, depending on what you're doing right now. The heedful sense of self is well worth protecting because it keeps your actions in line, gives you a sense of priorities. It encourages you to stay on the skillful path.

These distinctions are important. It's not the case that non-duality is where we're headed or what we want to develop along the path. We need to see

distinctions, especially between what's skillful and what's not, because we're making choices and they have their impact. We can't simply go on the idea that, "Well, my motivation is compassionate, therefore everything I do out of my compassionate motivation is going to be skillful." That doesn't work at all.

You have to educate your compassion. There are times when something seems to be compassionate right now, but as you begin to look down the line, you realize it's not the right or wise or even kind thing to do.

This requires that you be careful, that you notice what's happening. And if, as days and nights fly past, you begin to detect signs of complacency, you can do something about it. If you begin to see signs of mindlessness, try to develop mindfulness instead. You've got to keep watch on these things. After all, with the passage of time, as we get older, we can develop more and more abilities for a while, but then there comes a point where the body begins to reverse direction. You lose abilities. You lose strength. For a while you can make a difference by exercising and looking after your diet, but they've done studies to show that there's a certain point, as you get older, that exercise doesn't make any difference anymore. The body's just going to decay, regardless. Some forms of exercise that used to strengthen the body actually become bad for it. So you have to be very careful, while at the same time realizing that your true wealth lies in the mind. Are you stashing wealth into the mind? Or are you squandering your mental wealth and replacing it with sand and broken feathers? Are you trading candy for gold? Or gold for candy?

There's that story in the Canon of a village that suddenly had to be evacuated, so the villagers fled, leaving many of their belongings behind. After a while, two men from a nearby village said, "Let's go check out this village and see what was left behind. Maybe there's something valuable." They went through the houses and found some flax plants that had been harvested and were being prepared to make linen. Because these flax plants had some value, the men tied them up in bundles and loaded them on their shoulders. But as they went on, they found linen thread. And one man said, "This is what we wanted the flax plants for anyhow, so let's throw away the flax plants and take up the linen thread instead." The second man said, "No, I wrapped up my flax plants really nicely. I don't want to let go of them." So the first man threw away his flax plants and took the linen thread, while the second one kept his flax plants. They went along a little further and they found linen cloth. The same thing happened. The first man threw away his linen thread to load up on the linen

cloth, but the second one kept his nicely wrapped flax plants. After the linen cloth, they found things of greater and greater value until they finally ran across copper, silver, and gold. So when they were finished, the second man returned from the village with nothing but the flax plants he wrapped up so nicely, whereas the first one came back with a whole load of gold.

The wife of the second man was pretty upset. The wife of the first man was very happy, because he knew what to throw away and knew what to keep.

So you have to ask yourself: Do you know what to throw away? Do you know what to keep? What are you gathering up? Are you gathering up just memories? Or are you gathering up skills? The skills are gold. The memories are flax plants. The gold is going to be helpful as the inevitable happens—as the body grows ill, as it ages, as it begins to lose its functions and finally dies. The qualities of the mind you've been developing are going to be your gold.

So what habits are you gathering up as days and nights fly past? That's what you're becoming as days and nights fly past. This is one of the reasons why we try to get the mind into a state of comfort and ease, so that we can think about these things clearly, helpfully—so that we'll recognize gold when we see it. And we'll know how to get the most out of it.

The Wisdom of Wising Up

February 15, 2011

When you meditate during a Dhamma talk, pay very little attention to the talk. Give your primary attention to the meditation, to what you're doing right now: focusing on the breath. If you find the mind wandering off, bring it back. The talk helps you realize when you've wandered off. It acts like a fence. If you run up against the fence, you come back to the breath. It also helps point out things you might notice in the breath, ways you can deal with the breath to help the mind to settle down and feel secure and happy.

This can take time, getting the mind and the breath to settle down together. During that period of settling down, the mind can get discouraged and bored. It can find all sorts of reasons for not staying in the present, which aborts the process. To settle the mind takes not only time but also as few interruptions as possible. Ultimately, though, the mind can begin to notice that the act of focusing on the breath does give it a better place to stay. As results gradually build, the breath grows smoother. The energy in the body has fewer conflicts. It seems to flow in harmony and it provides a good, stable place to stay. The mind is able to settle down more quickly and securely.

Giving the mind a good foundation allows it to really see clearly what it's doing and to see where it's made mistakes. There's a lot to learn from mistakes, and yet most of us don't like looking at them. We pretend they didn't happen. If something in life goes badly, we tend to blame other factors, either other people or things totally beyond our control. There are times when problems do come from outside, but those aren't the ones that cause the most suffering, and they're not the ones you're responsible for. You're responsible for the areas where you can make choices. That's what you want to look for.

The Buddha once said that one of the signs of wisdom is recognizing your own foolishness, seeing where you've made mistakes. That gives you an opportunity to change your ways. As he says, "A fool who recognizes his own foolishness is to that extent wise." Even then, there are foolish and wise ways of looking at your own foolishness. To say, "I am a fool," closes off a lot of opportunities. If you're a fool, what are you going to do? There's not much room for self-improvement. Telling yourself, "I've *been* a fool," though, opens the possibility that you can change your ways. So, how do you recognize

you've been a fool? You see the consequences of your actions. You did something and it caused harm, either to yourself or to other people, and yet you had a choice. You didn't have to choose to do that foolish action. Recognizing choices and recognizing the consequences of your choices teaches the important principle that the mind needs to be trained so it can make better choices. Always keep this in mind. It's the beginning of wisdom.

What causes you to make wrong choices? Three main things: faulty intentions, faulty perceptions, or paying attention to the wrong things. Ask yourself: "What was my perception of the situation? Why or how was it wrong? What signals were coming my way that I didn't pay attention to?" Sometimes you may have read the situation and signals very accurately, yet you still proceeded with what you wanted to do. That was your intention. That's the element of will.

So you can investigate three main questions: "What am I paying attention to? What is my perception? What is my intention?" As meditators, we learn how to explore all three of these questions.

First, we're taught to pay attention to where there's suffering and what's causing it. This can start on a blatant level in any area of life and then move into the mind. While meditating, consider what ways of breathing and focusing on the breath are causing stress.

As you're paying attention to the issue of stress, you can move to questions of perception, asking yourself how your perceptions are acting as a cause of stress, and how they might be converted to act as the path to its end. You might ask: "Is this stress caused by the way I perceive the breath? What kind of mental picture do I have of the breathing process? How does that add to the stress? Where does it create barriers in the body that prevent the breath energy from flowing in easily?"

If you perceive the body as a bellows with only a tiny hole where the breath can come in, how about changing the perception to one where all your pores are holes where the breath can come in and out so you don't have to pull it in or push it out? Also, think of the breath permeating everywhere in the body, like water in a sponge. You can find other ways of perceiving, too. Try asking: "When the breath comes in, what direction does it flow in the body? Does it flow up? If it's flowing up, is it causing headaches?" If that's the case, let it flow down. There's a famous Zen monk of centuries past, Hakuin, who began suffering from what he called "Zen sickness." Basically, it was excess

energy going up into his head. His way of curing it was to think of a huge ball of butter on top of his head gradually melting. Each time he breathed in, the perception of melting butter allowed the breath energy to flow down.

Those are questions of perception. Then there are questions of intention.

As you're meditating, you're dealing very directly with intention. Are all the members of the committee on board with the desire to stay with the breath? Which ones aren't? When they're not on board, where do they want to wander? What are they looking for? Why?

The Buddha said to try to get the mind to settle down in right concentration, you have to seclude it from unskillful qualities. You have to seclude it from sensuality. Sensuality means your obsession with thinking about and planning sensual pleasures. All too often, when the mind finds it has an opportunity of a whole hour with no other responsibilities, it wants to think about sights, sounds, smells, tactile sensations, and flavors. All kinds of things: planning tomorrow's meal or reflecting on today's meal. Remind yourself, "That doesn't really accomplish anything." The Buddha once said, "If you find yourself obsessed with sensuality, you'd be better off sleeping." He never really encouraged sleep that much, but this is one case where sleep is the preferable alternative—better than obsessing over sensuality.

Still better is getting the mind out of the sensual realm and into the realm of form—your sense of the body from the inside—which is what you're developing while you're working with the breath energy in the body. So, if you find the mind wandering off to sensual pleasures, remind yourself, "This is not the time for that." If it's really obsessed, you can remind yourself of all the dangers that come from sensuality. There are many passages in the Canon where the Buddha describes or gives examples and analogies to undercut the glamour and the allure that sensual pleasures have for us. They're like a drop of honey on the blade of a knife. They're like borrowed goods that the owners can take back at any time. Thinking about these analogies can help bring to your senses.

He said you also have to seclude the mind from unskillful qualities. This covers everything from wrong views, wrong resolves, any of the path factors that are wrong, that involve thoughts of cruelty or ill will. Even when people behave unjustly, you have to learn how to set aside thoughts of revenge, because they accomplish nothing good. Remind yourself that what other people do is their kamma; what you do is your kamma. You can't ultimately be

responsible for their kamma; however, you can be responsible for your own actions. So, you spread thoughts of goodwill: thoughts that they may be happy, and especially that they may understand the causes for true happiness and then really act on them. That's a thought you can extend even to people who are really cruel. In fact, you especially want to extend that to cruel people so that instead of focusing on getting revenge or retribution, you open your mind to the question of what you might do or say that would actually get them to change their ways. That way *your* intentions become more skillful.

Sometimes it's good to do preventive strikes on wrong resolves before you settle down. If you know that the mind has been obsessing about a particular thought during the day, you've got to do some antidote thinking to pry the mind loose. Other times, you may realize the problems only after you've started settling down with the breath. Something springs up unexpectedly from just below the surface. For instance, you may start thinking about things you did or said in the past that you really regret. In that case, spread thoughts of goodwill to whoever you harmed. Resolve not to repeat that mistake, and then get back to the breath, realizing that a mind well-centered, with a good solid foundation, is much more likely to be able to stick to its skillful intentions and results.

In this way, as you meditate, you learn the lessons that help you wise up after realizing you've been foolish. Strengthen these lessons by looking at your intentions, attention, and perceptions, and realize that these govern your actions. Remember: What you *do* is what matters. There's a clear distinction between skillful and unskillful. You don't want to act in unskillful ways. You've seen the harm.

This is the wisdom of wising up: recognizing when you've been a fool in any way. The lessons implicit in that wisdom include believing that choices are real; they have real consequences; those choices depend on views, which in turn are based on perceptions, attention, and intentions, what you would like to achieve through your actions. These are all important lessons. This is why the Buddha focuses on these elements as being crucial to what shapes your life so you can start shaping it in a wise way.

When you consider the Buddha's teachings—for example, the four noble truths, the three characteristics, the five hindrances—it's easy to dismiss them as cultural relics or somebody's personal proclivity. Why not five or three noble truths? Why does he focus on these particular teachings? Why focus on suffering? Was there something about his culture that kept him from seeing the

beauty of life? Remember, though, that all of his teachings have their roots in some very common human experiences, in particular, the wisdom of wising up. It's about seeing when you've been a fool. It's not that you *are* a fool but you've *been* foolish. Keep that distinction in mind and use it to take heed of the lessons you can learn from having been foolish. Make the most of any opportunities to overcome this past foolishness and to act wisely. That's when you get in touch with the root values that led the Buddha to teach the way he did and to focus on the things he focused on. You see how wise he really was.

So take that wisdom of wising up and see how far it can go.

Living Forward, Understanding Backward

March 7, 2007

As a famous thinker once said, the basic problem in life is that we live forward but understand backward. In other words, we make decisions that are going to have an impact on the future, but we don't know the future, and often we don't know what that impact will be. All we know is what's happened in the past, and sometimes we don't even know that very well, because our memory gets fogged, distorted. Psychologists have observed that most people tend to repeat decisions they made in the past even though the decisions didn't really make them happy. We forget, we thought it would make us happy the last time around, and it didn't. Well, we try it again and again. In other words, it's Einstein's definition of insanity: doing the same thing but expecting different results.

So it's a normal part of our lives that we're going to make mistakes, make decisions that we hope will lead to happiness, to good situations, and then they turn out leading to something else. If we don't want to be insane, we have to learn how to learn from our mistakes. The first step in doing that, though, is to prevent as many mistakes as possible. We do that by being as observant as possible.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to get rid of as much delusion as we can, to try to be more mindful, more alert. Mindfulness is basically the ability to strengthen your memory—in this case, your active memory. If you want to do something, you keep reminding yourself to do it. You sense that it's going to be a good thing, that it will be in your interest, so you don't forget. Don't get distracted by other ideas or other intentions.

As for alertness, that's what enables you to pay close attention to what you're actually doing.

So while we're focused on the breath, we're developing mindfulness and alertness, and a quality called *ardency,* which means the desire that, whatever you do, you try to do skillfully. In this case, try to relate to the breath in a skillful way. Try to notice what in the past worked in getting the mind to settle down with the breath, what didn't work, and see if the same observations apply now. Sometimes they will; sometimes you begin to realize that what you observed the last time around was a different situation or you didn't observe it

carefully enough. So you've got to be more observant this time around. But the basic principle is as long as you're observant *now,* you can judge these things as to what's working, what's not.

As you get clearer and clearer about what you're doing in terms of your thoughts, words, and deeds, it's a lot easier then to see the connections between your actions and their results. When the Buddha gave instructions to his son, he told him: First thing, before you do or say or think anything, ask yourself what the results are going to be. If it's something you've done before, you can pretty much anticipate the results. If you realized in the past that that kind of action led to harm, don't do it again. If you remember that it led to harm but you go ahead anyhow, that's the kind of mistake you really regret, because it's going to lead to harm again even though you should have known better.

There are essentially two kinds of mistakes: blameworthy mistakes—the ones where you knew better but you went ahead and did it anyhow—and mistakes that are blameless, because you didn't know. When you don't know, you try to figure it out and then act on what you think is your best intention, what seems most likely to lead to happiness and least likely to lead to harm. Now, if you notice that, as you're following through with the action, it does actually lead to harm, you stop. You're not committed to continuing with a mistake. If you don't see any harm coming from the action, carry through with it. When it's done, reflect back on what the actual results were. If you see that it led to any unintended harm, you make the resolve not to repeat that mistake, and talk it over with someone else who is further along on the path, to see what insights they have to offer. If, however, you see that there was no harm at all, take joy in the fact that you're on the path and training yourself well. Then keep up with the training.

So, on the one hand, you try to prevent the repeat of past mistakes, but at the same time you realize there is the possibility that you're going to make further mistakes in the future, because there are lots of conditions, lots of situations that you really can't foresee, in which case you try to go with your own skillful intentions as much as you can. This is another reason why we meditate: to strengthen the skillful intentions in the mind, the intentions that are not wound up in greed, aversion, or delusion. Greed and aversion are fairly easy to see. Delusion is hard—because after all, when you're deluded, you don't *know* you're deluded. You don't really know the truth. The only way around that is to keep your past mistakes in mind and to learn from them.

So a large part of the practice is learning how to take mistakes in stride. The Buddha says you should feel shame over your mistakes, but not the kind of shame where you feel you're a horrible person. He advises healthy shame: the shame where you realize you did something that was beneath you, that was not appropriate for you. You don't want to repeat that mistake. This kind of shame is a facet of healthy pride. It's not debilitating.

The Buddha teaches the same attitude around issues of remorse. You realize you've made mistakes in the past. He doesn't have you dwell on them beyond just recognizing that they were mistakes. You remind yourself that however guilty you may feel about the mistake, the sense of guilt is not going to go back and erase the mistake. The best you can do is to resolve not to repeat it. If you dwell on the guilt, it'll sap your resolve. So, instead, you try to strengthen skillful qualities in the mind—in particular, the attitudes we chanted just now: unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, unlimited equanimity. In other words, put yourself in a position where you can maintain these attitudes toward anybody at any time, whenever appropriate. Don't let these attitudes be limited by your likes and dislikes.

Basically you start out with goodwill. Remind yourself that there's no need to see anybody in the world suffer, because when people are suffering, that's when they tend to do evil things. They feel threatened; they feel attacked; they feel they're in a weak position and so they strike out. So no matter how much you may dislike a particular person, there's really no good reason to wish ill for that person. The wise attitude is to wish that that person find true happiness. If he or she could find true happiness within, the disagreeable behavior that he or she is engaging in would fall away. At the same time, if you can develop goodwill for everybody, it's a lot harder for *you* to harm people, yourself or anyone else. It strengthens your resolve not to repeat your mistake.

The same with compassion: You want to be able to feel it for anyone, regardless. Compassion is what goodwill feels toward people who are suffering, or who are creating the causes for suffering. You don't want to pile more suffering on top of them. If you find yourself in a position where you can help, go ahead. You're happy to help. If you're not in a position to help, you extend that wish—may they be relieved from suffering—so that maybe someday, if you do find yourself in a position where you can help, you can carry through.

As for empathetic joy, that's what goodwill feels for people who are

happy or who are creating the causes for happiness. You remind yourself not to be jealous of their happiness. You don't resent their happiness. Try to put yourself in their place. As the Buddha once said, if you see somebody really miserable and suffering, remind yourself: You've been there. If you see a leper on the side of the road, sticking a burning stick into his wounds because they hurt so much, trying to numb the sensation of the itch, remind yourself: You've been there. When you see someone who's really wealthy and powerful, remind yourself: You've been there, too. This should provoke a sense of dismay over the ups and downs of this wandering on.

But what it also means is that when you see somebody suffering, remind yourself that you're not necessarily a better person than they are. And you're not immune to that suffering in the future. So you do what you can to help. When someone's happy, remind yourself that you've been there, too. Whatever the happiness may be, it's bound to pass. And the happiness you see in other people is not a sign that they have more good kamma than you do. There's no such thing as a single kamma account for each person, and what you see is not the running balance in that single account. We all have lots of different actions in the past, and those actions are like seeds that will sprout at different times. Some of them take a long time; some of them take a short time. When you look at your present condition, or anyone else's present condition, you don't see the unsprouted seeds. There's no telling what they'll yield when they sprout. So a person's present happiness is no indicator of what karmic potentials he or she has in store—which means that there's no need to be jealous of anyone else's present happiness.

Finally, equanimity is for the situations you really can't help, as when someone is really suffering and there's really nothing you can do for them. You have to develop equanimity. This is not a hardhearted equanimity, it's just that you realize you can't let your happiness rise and fall with theirs, because you've got other things you need to do, other areas where you *can* be of help. You want to focus on those.

The trick with all these emotions is learning how to develop them when you need them. All too often our attitude toward our emotions is that they're a given. But, as the Buddha pointed out, you're already shaping your emotions, which means you can change the way you shape them. This is an important skill: that you be able to feel goodwill for anyone at any time when it's called for; that you can feel compassion and empathetic joy any time for anyone when

it's called for; that you can develop equanimity even in cases where people are close to you, you want very much to help them, but you can't. You've got to develop equanimity for their suffering. And this requires skill.

This is another thing we learn through meditation. As the Buddha once said, our emotions are a fabrication. They're created in the mind. They're not necessarily a given. What are they made out of? Physically, they're affected by the breath. Inside the mind, they are affected by the kind of conversations the mind has with itself, and also by feelings of pleasure and pain, neither pleasure nor pain, and perceptions—the labels we put on things. As we meditate, we're learning how to be more conscious of these factors so that we can turn them in the right direction. If you breathe with more knowledge and alertness, it helps to develop more skillful emotions. Because what is an emotion? It's a thought that gets in your body. It has an impact on your heart rate and other physical processes. Well, the impact comes through the breath. So if you can learn how to get in touch with your breath and can smooth out the breath, soothe out the breath when it gets erratic or disturbed, then you have a grounding for developing skillful emotions and *embodying* skillful emotions, so they're not just thoughts. You feel them in your body.

As for your perceptions: You learn to look at the world in a way that makes it easier to develop these attitudes. This is also a process that you learn how to master through the meditation as you perceive the breath, say, in the different parts of the body, perceive how it can be spread around, perceive how the breath can be a whole-body process, perceive various ways of visualizing the breath, visualizing the way you relate to the breath. If you learn how to change these things consciously, it gets easier to consciously change other perceptions in day-to-day life as well. That way you can actually turn your emotions in the proper direction.

This has an impact on the issue of mistakes in several ways. One, if you can get more skillful in how you relate to other people, how you relate to yourself, you're less likely to make the particular kinds of mistakes that would obviously do harm. As for mistakes that you can't help simply because you couldn't see what was going to happen in the future, there's a passage where the Buddha said that those kinds of mistakes, if you learn how to develop these unlimited attitudes, don't carry that much karmic impact, because your basic attitude doesn't have limits. There are no limits on your goodwill, no limits on your compassion, no limits on your empathetic joy, or your equanimity. When

your mind is broadened in this way, then the impact of limited past events just doesn't hit it so hard.

Even more so as you develop more concentration and discernment: You began to separate the mind from its objects. In other words, when pain arises, you're aware of the pain, but you don't have to identify with the pain, or with the perception that says, "my pain." You can cut right through it and you find that letting it drop makes a huge difference.

Or even just the perception of "pain": You learn how to question that. You learn to see when a particular perception comes when, for example, there's pain in your legs. How do you visualize that pain? How do you relate to the pain? Where are you in relationship to the pain? Start asking these questions, and you begin to realize how strange some of your perceptions are. Many times you come up with unexpected answers, where you catch yourself portraying the pain in your mind as something with a will of its own. When you stop and think about it, you realize that, of course, it doesn't have a will, it's just there, it's a malfunction of the body. And it doesn't have a shape. The pain also moves around quite a lot, changes a lot more quickly than we tend to assume. You begin to see how your assumptions shape your experience of things. That means you can consciously change your assumptions, change your perceptions, so that you don't have to suffer so much.

This gives you the skill to deal with whatever comes. When you have that kind of skill, you can have a lot more confidence, knowing that even if you do make unintended mistakes, you have the skill to deal with the results. In other words, the more mindfulness, the more alertness, the more concentration and discernment you can develop now, the less likely you are to make mistakes. Even when you *do* make mistakes, you can live with them more easily without being harmed by them.

Buddhism is unusual among the world's religions in admitting that it was founded by someone who knew he had made mistakes. The Buddha was a human being just like us. Through many years of his many lives, he knew he had made lots of mistakes but he learned how to learn from those mistakes. That's what made all the difference. This means that he knew what it's like to make a mistake, to regret making mistakes, to be in the position of living forward but only understanding backwards. And so from his experience of learning how to overcome those difficulties, he gives us wise advice on not only trying to prevent as many mistakes as you can, but also learning how to

live with mistakes, because that's what life is full of. We often make mistakes. If we take them as an opportunity to learn rather than a reason to go into strong guilt or strong denial, we can benefit from them. The more clearly you see and understand what's going on right now, then the less likely it is that the choices you make right now are going to cause harm on into the future.

So instead of focusing forward or backward, we learn something from looking back and then focusing back on Now as much as possible, because everything comes together right here and now. Everything comes out of right here. So as you go through life, try to bring as much attention as possible to the quality of mind that underlies your decisions right here, right now. Make it is as skillful as possible, remembering past mistakes, remembering past right decisions, and learning how to live skillfully with the results of both.

Awe

January 21, 2010

When we use the phrase, “going out into the elements,” we’re not usually talking about warm breezes of a mild spring day. We’re talking about when the wind, water, earth, and fire are showing their extremes—like tonight, with the cold wind and rain, the thunder, the lightning. This is actually a theme of meditation: thinking about the physical elements, about how huge and awesome they are. The perception of the elements goes together with the perception of wilderness as a way of cleansing the mind of its small everyday concerns, the concerns that otherwise loom so large. These perceptions help you realize how small you are, or at the very least how small your body is: your little bundle of earth, wind, water, and fire right here.

That’s one of the reasons the Buddha recommends going out into the wilds, into the elements. It’s a way of gaining perspective. For instance, he talks about leaving a village and going out into the wilds: You sit down and you hold in mind the perception that you’re out in the wilderness, and it’s a very different perception from being in the village with human beings. Whether the village is a small village in Thailand or the global village on your TV, you come out here and those concerns just drop away. You think of yourself being surrounded by nature, surrounded by wilderness. It can be a refreshing perception, but it also carries an edge. Wilderness is big and contains dangers. You realize how small your body is, and how vulnerable, and you feel a sense of awe.

That awe is a useful emotion. It’s very close to *samvega.* In fact, one of the meanings of *samvega* is fear, awe, or terror. It’s one of the primary emotions in the practice: realizing how vulnerable the body is, and as a result, how vulnerable your mind is. This body that you care so much for, that you’ve looked after since you were able to look after it, all these years: It’s such a small thing. The wind we had today could have reached the point of tornadoes, and who knows where the tornadoes might have landed. They could have wiped out the monastery, wiped out other people’s homes and businesses.

And that’s just the wind. The rain can wash whole hillsides away. There have been fires that have come through the immediate area and have burned thousands of acres. When I first saw the fire that forced us to evacuate the

monastery three years ago, my first thought was: "Nature's trying to kill us." There've been earthquakes. These things happen all over the world.

When we see the results of, say, an earthquake, it's shocking, realizing that we live on an earth that, with a small shrug, can do this to human beings. As soon as you lay claim to the physical elements of a body, you're exposed to the physical elements of the world, regardless of where you are, and those outside elements can crush the body without a moment's thought.

When you're out in the wilderness, you're even more conscious of that fact. Years back, I was up in Alaska, camping at the Arctic circle, and even though it was summer—which meant that it was relatively mild—there was still a very strong sense that for hundreds of miles around there was just nothing but nature and more nature—and nature didn't care about you at all. You could die and it would be totally indifferent. That gave rise to a sense of awe. It was a real help in practicing concentration, in getting the mind to settle down. On the one hand, the disturbances of being involved in human society were not there. But on the other, nature seemed so much bigger and implacable. Down here in the lower 48, wilderness is just little islands surrounded by a sea of civilization. Up there, it's the other way around. Civilization is little islands and the wilderness is the sea. It's all around, and very sobering. That kind of sobering thought is very useful in the meditation, for it helps to still the mind.

Sariputta recommends a similar reflection: Think about the different physical elements in the body. You realize that these elements are the same elements you see outside when there's a storm, a wildfire, an earthquake, a flood. When those elements outside can change in such radical ways, what about this little body you've got here, composed of the same elements? Is there anything constant there? Anything you can really lay hold to as your self or yours? And in response to that question, he says, the body has only a No. It denies your desire for ownership.

So it's useful to develop this sense of awe. It helps put things into perspective, that these things we hold onto—the physical body, the affairs of our daily lives, the ups and downs, the concerns about what this person thinks, what that person says, what's going to happen to me, what's going to happen to the people I love—are eventually all going to die. In one way or another, the elements are going to take over. They're going to take everything back. These things we've claimed to be "us" or "ours" are going to show that they know

nothing of our claims. They have no respect for our claims. That thought focuses you inside: What *do* you have? You've got just your awareness. You've got the mind. What shape is the mind in?

Fortunately, the Buddha doesn't leave us stranded here. All too often in the West, this sense of awe is left simply as an aesthetic sense or a vague religious feeling. But the Buddha gives you further instructions on what to do with it. Take that sense of the earth and think just of the earthness of the earth—or the windness of the wind. Don't focus on any of the little details. Make the earthness of earth, and how vast it is, the object of your concentration. Allow your awareness to take on some of that vastness and then learn how to hold it there.

If the elements seem threatening, think of the vastness of space, the space that penetrates all of this activity of the wind and fire and rain. Space penetrates the walls of the meditation hall, the floor, the roof, everything. There's space in all directions, all around us. Learn how to hold that perception. That can form a basis for concentration, and concentration of that sort can put the mind in the right state to reflect on things in their proper perspective: to look at where you cling to things, and what might be in your best interest to let go. If you're looking for your happiness in something that the elements could destroy, don't think you have a special pact with them. They're large and overwhelming and don't give a damn.

But you can escape their influence; you can escape their power. That's why we're practicing here: to find something that's not subject to all this wind and rain and the movement of the earth, the potential for fire. This is a very useful contemplation on not-self: the undependability of the elements, the stress of trying to find happiness in something that these elements could destroy. Even if it's not yet being destroyed outright, these elements are just wearing away, wearing away the elements of the body, the faculties of the body, our abilities to see and smell and taste and hear. To think in these ways really helps us to let go of the attachments that are causing us suffering, that weigh the mind down.

So here we are in the midst of a storm. But there's something deep inside that doesn't have to suffer from the storm, doesn't have to be threatened by the storm. Even though we may reflect on the awesomeness of the powers of nature and how huge they are, there is something in the mind that's even more enormous, more solid, than they are. It can be found through our own efforts, and it offers a security that you can't find in any place—because it's outside of

places. There's a recurrent phrase in the Canon of the arahant's being "released everywhere," which means released from every where, every place. That idea's awesome, too. The reality of it, once you've touched it, is even more awesome than the idea.

It's always helpful to keep these thoughts in mind.

Conviction & Confidence

August 22, 2010

Ajaan Suwat used to recommend that when you start meditating, try to develop an attitude of confidence and clarity. Those are the meanings of the word, *pasada.* Then he'd say to combine that attitude with conviction, or *saddha*—conviction that you're doing something really worthwhile. We're not here just going through the motions. We're working on something that's really good: training the mind. Whether the results come quickly or slowly is not the issue. We're working on something that's noble. There's dignity to what we're doing. We're stepping back from our usual concerns, our usual appetites, and looking carefully at the implications of our actions, realizing that if we're going to act in a way that's responsible, we really have to take responsibility for our minds. And that's what meditation is: taking responsibility for your mind.

So you need the conviction that this is worthwhile and the confidence that it can be done. The word *conviction* traditionally covers four things. The first three are conviction that the Buddha really was awakened, conviction that his Dhamma is well-taught, and conviction that the Sangha of noble disciples has practiced well—in other words, they have practiced in such a way that they've reached awakening, too. When conviction in these three things is confirmed by your first taste of awakening, it issues in a fourth quality, which is that your precepts are clean. In other words, you're firmly established in the five precepts.

So even though your practice may not have reached the point where your conviction is verified, that you've really seen that these things are true, it's good to cultivate that conviction as much as you can. You cultivate your precepts. You cultivate your conviction in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Those passages we chant every evening—the recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha—are actually descriptions of what verified conviction is like. Some of the words may seem strange, but it's useful to reflect on the ones that resonate, the ones that seem relevant to your practice.

To begin with, reflect on the fact that the Buddha was awakened through his own efforts. He was able to put an end to greed, aversion, and delusion. That's why he's a Worthy One. That right there really merits conviction

because it reminds us that it is possible through human effort to put an end to suffering. It is possible through human effort to cleanse the mind. Sometimes you hear the idea that the ego is so corrupt that anything it tries to do is going to be corrupted as well. That idea closes off all the doors except for one: the hope that somebody is going to come along and save you. But that hope is irresponsible.

The responsible attitude is that you're responsible for the actions of your mind. You really can choose. And fortunately your motives are not always corrupt. As the Buddha said, you can take advantage of the fact that you want true happiness, and develop some noble qualities out of that. The qualities of purity, compassion, and wisdom come from taking your desire for true happiness seriously.

So these things are possible. They're part of the range of possibilities of being human. That right there is a challenge. The Buddha, in effect, is asking you, "Do you want to live your life keeping this possibility open or do you want to close it off?" Some people actually do want to close it off. They don't like the responsibility that comes with the possibility that true happiness can be found through human effort, that the mind can be cleansed through human effort. It asks a lot. But then, what is life like when those possibilities are closed off? Pretty miserable and confined.

I remember when I first went to Singapore. I marveled at how planned everything was. But the sense of marvel was not totally positive. They had everything laid out for you: where you were going to be born, what you were going to do as a child, where you were going to get your education, where they would channel you when you'd go to work. They had things planned out for your retirement, and then for your death. It gives rise to the feeling that you might as well go ahead and die and get it over with, if that was going to circumscribe the totality of your life. But thinking about the possibility that true awakening can be found through your efforts: that breaks through those circumscribed limits. That's not part of anybody else's plan, but that can be part of *your* plan. And to whatever extent you can nurture that conviction, it keeps your heart nurtured and nourished as well.

As for the Dhamma, the Dhamma is well-taught. The Buddha set things out clearly. I've been reading recently about the Romantic attitude toward religious texts, which is that people who write religious texts are those who've gained a sense of oneness, of the deeper parts of themselves in oneness with

the world around them, and they just express poetically how wonderful that is. The way they express it, of course, is going to be determined by their cultural background and their personal talents. So the differences in their modes of expression don't really matter. You can interpret their writings as poetically as you like because they were just expressive poetry to begin with.

But the Buddha wasn't that sort of teacher. He said that the things he experienced through his awakening were like the leaves in a forest. He didn't waste his time telling us about all the leaves. He gave us the handful of leaves that shows how to gain awakening for ourselves. He wasn't just expressing how wonderful it is to be awakened. He gave us directions for how to do it. And his directions are very precise, very clear.

There's a passage where he contrasts his way of teaching with what he calls training in bombast. Training in bombast is where you're taught things that are very poetic, that sound very high, very lovely, very inspiring, but no one is encouraged to ask what, precisely, they mean. After all, in bombast there really is no precise meaning. It's all just vague, high-sounding words. But, as the Buddha said, he taught cross-questioning. Your training with him was in cross-questioning. When there was a teaching you didn't understand, he encouraged you to ask, "What's the meaning of this? What's the purpose of that? How far should this word be taken?" That way, wherever there are any doubts or uncertainties, you can clear them up.

And the Buddha himself was open to cross-questioning. In fact, he took it so seriously that the next-to-the-last thing he said before passing away was to ask the monks, "Does anyone have any questions, any doubts, any perplexity about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, the path, or the practice?" He made the offer three times, and even then after the third time, he said, "Okay, if you're too embarrassed to speak in public, just inform someone sitting right next to you." That shows how earnest he was, in that he didn't want to leave any doubts or perplexity behind.

So when we study the Dhamma, we're not dealing with bombast or vague poetic expressions. We don't have all the uncertainty of trying to figure out, "What on earth does this symbolize? Is this an allegory?" The Buddha's teachings are like a training manual. They're meant to be put into practice, telling you specific things to do. Now, in some cases he does leave an open question here and there, but it's a question that causes you to grow when you try to figure out the answer on your own. If you're trying to get the mind to

settle down, he says, watch the breath as it's long, watch it as it's short. Train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. Train yourself to calm the sense of fabrication that comes with the breath. The meaning of these instructions isn't obvious, but you can figure out how to do them on your own through experimentation. Trying to figure them out is a good exercise for your discernment.

Before teaching breath meditation, he'd encourage you to develop an attitude of patience. He said to be as nonreactive as the earth. People throw disgusting things on the earth, and the earth doesn't shrink back in horror. It just sits right there. The same with the other great elements. You can use water to wash away dirty things, and the water doesn't complain. Wind blows dirty things around, yet the wind doesn't complain. Fire burns dirty things, yet fire doesn't complain. In other words, you try to develop that quality of solidity and imperturbability so that you can really observe things, to overcome any tendency to push or pull to get quick results, and then getting frustrated and falling back—getting discouraged, wanting things to be a certain way and getting frustrated when they aren't. If you're going to learn from your meditation, you've got to develop an attitude of patience and solidity that allows you to sit with things, however they are, and really see them for what they are.

Pose the question in your mind and just watch, try different approaches, because the Buddha didn't stop his meditation instructions with equanimity and patience. He went on to teach the 16 steps of breath meditation, most of which involve training, experimenting, and using your ingenuity. There's an intentional element to this practice. You're trying to figure out a skill, sensitize yourself to a certain area of your experience: either the body or your feelings or the state of your mind. Notice where there's stress and then figure out how you can calm that stress.

In other words, these are things you do. You don't just sit there. You don't give up trying to improve things. If things aren't working, you develop a confident attitude: There's got to be a way out of here, but you simply haven't figured it out yet. The problem lies in something you're doing. Maybe you're pushing in the wrong direction or up against something in the wrong way, but you can change that if you step back and watch for a while.

The Buddha has it all very clearly laid out, so that we don't have to keep starting from scratch every time we practice. You just learn how to apply

general principles to your specific case. In this way, there's a creative element in the practice. But you can rest confident that things were laid out clearly. Whatever's there in the Dhamma is meant for you to use as part of the path to awakening. When you find awakening, you don't have to have anybody describe it for you, or tell you how wonderful it is. You know what it's like for yourself.

As for conviction in the Sangha, that they've practiced well, that's useful for when comparing yourself to the Buddha seems a little bit unreal. You look at the members of the noble Sangha: men, women, young, old, educated, uneducated, rich, poor. Some people practiced quickly, got quick results; other people took a long time but they finally got the desired results. Sometimes it's most inspiring to read about the ones who were having the most difficulty, because you look at their difficulties and say, "Well, mine are nothing compared to theirs." Yet in the midst of their discouragement, they could find something worthwhile. And they had the conviction that carried them through, even when things looked pretty bleak. Their conviction was what enabled them to find a way out.

It's like being lost in the woods. If you think there's no way out, you're not going to find a way out. But if you're convinced that there must be a way out, you keep looking and looking and looking, and regardless of how long it takes, the conviction that there's a way out is a necessary part of finding the escape.

The fourth element of conviction is learning to keep your precepts pure. It may seem strange to list this as a kind of conviction, but for the Buddha, conviction isn't just conviction in ideas; it's something you actually put into practice. It has to find its way into your actions. If you really do want to develop compassion, wisdom, and purity, you've first got to look at your actions: What are you doing? What's the impact of your actions? How scrupulous are you about doing things the right way, the harmless way? The more you find that you can stick with your precepts, the more confidence you gain in yourself. At the same time, you're developing the essential qualities of mind you'll need for the meditation: mindfulness, alertness, being observant, so that your actions are not at odds with your principles.

When progress in your meditation seems slow, you remind yourself, "At least I'm not harming anyone." That's something to treasure. When you look at the way the world is, everybody seems to be shoving everybody else out of the way, to get—what? Something that's going to slip right through their fingers.

All they have left is the memory of the horrible things they did, which is no treasure at all. But here we're developing treasures. We've got the treasure of conviction, the treasure of virtue, the treasure of a sense of shame, i.e., your sense of your own self-worth, that you would be ashamed to stoop to harmful actions. The treasure of compunction: that when you think of doing something harmful, you just pull back and say, "No, I can't do that," for fear of the harm. You've got four of the seven noble treasures right there.

When you bring this attitude to the practice, you're starting with a good foundation. You're ready to learn from the meditation regardless of how well or how poorly it may go. You're not so neurotic or brittle that you have to pretend that there is no such thing as poor meditation. Sometimes the meditation just doesn't work. Okay, it doesn't work. Recognize that it's not going well and pose some questions in your mind. Exactly what's going wrong? Tease things out. Is there something wrong with the breath, something wrong with the body? Is it the state of mind you're bringing? The beliefs you're bringing? Something that happened today and got you all stirred up?

Learn how to separate these things out, so that regardless of how well or poorly the meditation goes, you know how to learn from it, to learn how to benefit from it. The lessons you learn, the benefits you get, may not be the ones you planned, but you've got to learn how to appreciate them so that your sense of conviction stays strong and gets more and more reliable. You learn to appreciate the results that you *do* get, regardless of whether they're what you wanted in terms of the bliss, the rapture, whatever. There are a lot of other important things to learn from meditation, you know. And when you learn how to recognize them, they're all good.

Concentration Work

February 5, 2011

Ajaan Lee would always recommend starting out with three to seven good, long, deep in-and-out breaths to highlight the process of breathing in the body and to give the body some energy. As the mind settles down, there's a tendency for the breath to get very subtle and quiet, and sometimes it's not really enough for the body's energy needs. Ajaan Fuang had a student one time who really liked the quiet breath. She would always go there in her meditation. I remember him criticizing her one night for that. He said, "You really have to read the body to see what it needs right now. If you go just for the quiet breath all the time, it saps your strength."

An essential skill in meditation is learning how to read what your body needs. Give it more energy when it needs more, even though that may not seem as quiet and refined as you'd like. You've got to take care of both the body and the mind. Consider the issue of directed thought and evaluation. Ajaan Lee recommended that you go through the body in quite a lot of detail to settle things down and to clear things up to create a good place where you can feel at home. People complain that it's not quieting to think about the breath and work with the breath energy in different parts of the body. Well, it's part of the work needed in order to get things ready to settle down in a way that will be solid and lasting.

Be willing to do the work that's needed for a good, solid concentration. Don't just go hiding out in a little quiet corner. Allowing your awareness to spread and fill the whole body is what gives you the proper foundation for your meditation. In doing this work, you exercise your faculties of mindfulness, alertness, and discernment. There's a tendency in some circles to encourage students talented in concentration to direct their energies in the direction of concentration. If they're more talented in the area of analyzing the mind, they're encouraged in the direction of discernment. Ajaan Fuang, though, would turn tables on people. If they were already talented in concentration, he'd have them work more in learning how to think about and analyze the movements of the mind. If they were already talented in analyzing things, he'd have them learn how to be quiet: just sit with things for a while without predetermining all the time. This way, you learn how to detect when things are out of balance

and to bring them back into balance when needed.

There's work to be done. Ajaan Lee called it your concentration work: the directed thought and the evaluation. When you start out with these things, they can be rather coarse; but by exercising them, you learn how to bring them to refinement. Sometimes you find that refined breath is too weak. You're drifting off. You've got to strengthen things again, to get in touch with the body and to gain a sense of how to listen to it and respond to its needs. This is especially difficult for people who have body issues, who basically want to run away and block out their awareness of the body. Learn how to trust the different sensations in the body and trust your ability to handle them. In the beginning, you may want to start with just one little, familiar spot in the body or a spot that seems okay, and be willing to hang out there for a while. It may not seem impressive, it may not seem all that quiet yet, but you're working on potentials here. You're also working on patience, learning how to allow potentials to develop in a positive direction.

One of the constant themes in the stories that we hear as children is that you can't judge things by their appearances. You certainly can't judge things now as to what they're going to be in the future: the ugly duckling that turns into a swan, the troll who has gold, the little mouse that's able to help the lion. You have to learn to look for potentials. The Buddha said to work with the potentials in the body and in the breath energy. Even though part of the mind may want to slip off into a nice little cocoon where it doesn't have to think about anything and doesn't have to deal with anything at all, that goes nowhere. You've got work to do. You've got to come back to the breath. Even though it may not seem comfortable or blissful to begin with, you're going to explore a potential. Give it some space. Don't push the breath too much. Don't force it too much. Just allow it to go into areas where it may not have gone before.

Again, you're not trying to push or force things. The operative word is *allow, allow, allow.* Allow the breath to go down the back, allow it to go through the different organs in the torso, to go out your arms and out your legs. As you go through the body with the word "allow," you begin to notice that some parts of the body are resistant. In some cases, the resistance is pretty short-lived. All you have to do is think, "allow," and things begin to loosen up. Other times they won't loosen up so quickly. Just make a note to return to that area, and then continue to work through the parts that *can* connect into a feeling of free-flowing, mutually supportive energy among the different body parts,

rather than working at cross-purposes. Think of all the different organs in the body connecting up and strengthening one another. The energy in your left arm helps your right arm, and vice versa. Your right leg helps your left leg, and vice versa. As for the parts that don't want to join in yet, just leave them alone for the time being.

It's like creating a union of different countries. Some countries are really recalcitrant. They'll wait to see how the union is going before they're willing to join. Look at the long term in order to develop things for the best results in the future rather than for shutting things off for the quick fix in the cocoon. This type of outlook will lead to a greater sense of wellbeing, a greater sense of bliss.

In the course of the Buddha's quest for awakening, he did attain formless levels of concentration that can be attained without dealing with the body at all. However, when the time came to settle on the true path, he started with a form of concentration that was very much with the body: focusing on the breath, giving rise to a sense of ease and wellbeing, refreshment, and rapture. Then he worked the pleasure and rapture through the body in the same way that you knead moisture through dough. It's when your awareness is centered in the body like this that you open up areas that might be closed, to feel more at ease with areas that you've been running away from.

At the same time, you're opening up areas of the mind that you might have closed off as well. A psychological test recently found that people who tend to go into deep concentration are very unaware of themselves psychologically. Of course, the test results didn't say what type of concentration those people were doing. There is a concentration that actually allows people to run away from the present moment, having no sense of the body at all. This type of concentration attracts people in denial or people who are ill at ease with their own bodies for one reason or another. It also doesn't yield much awareness or discernment. As a result, these types of people are not going to be very self-aware.

Wrong concentration makes you unaware of yourself. In fact, it's often your unwillingness to be aware of yourself that drives you into that kind of wrong concentration to begin with. Right concentration requires that you be aware of the whole body and learn to feel at home in the body. This may take time as you get to know and trust things. It's like developing a friendship. You can't just walk up to somebody and immediately become deep and fast friends.

There are some people you have an instant rapport with, but the friendship has to be tested over time for you to know whether that rapport will really grow into a friendship. There are some people for whom it's difficult in the beginning, but you find over time that they are people you can trust. That's a friendship worth cultivating in spite of whatever difficulties may be involved. So in the long run, the work involved in learning how to develop a friendship with concentration is good, pleasurable work used for a higher end.

We may want to come here just to tune out and relax for a bit. But for meditation to be genuinely relaxing with a sense of clarity, wellbeing, and strength requires work. It's like visiting the gym. If you want to come away feeling strong, you have to be willing to exercise. Here, the work or exercise is directed thought and evaluation around the breath. Establish a beachhead in the body, an area of the body where you feel at ease and confident. Then learn how to expand from there, listening to the needs of the body. Does it need deep breathing? Does it need shallow breathing? We may have the idea that shallower or gentle breathing is better or more advanced than heavier breathing, but that's not always the case.

Listen to the needs of the body. It's in the listening that your mindfulness, alertness, and discernment develop and, acting together, bring the mind to a really solid concentration that can act as a basis for further wisdom, discernment, and insight to arise. You have to be willing to put in the effort, confident that the effort will pay off. What you give to the meditation is what makes all the difference.

Three Levels of Evaluation

September 29, 2009

Two nights ago it was so hot that most of us were sitting outside to catch what little breeze there might be. Tonight it's so cold that we're closing the windows, and people are all bundled up. It's hard to find conditions that are just right in every way. The world seems to swing back and forth from one extreme to the other. It's pretty much the same way with our minds. We can go through swings of extreme enthusiasm and extreme laziness; days when everything seems to be going perfectly fine—you sit down and meditate, and the mind is very obedient—and then, not much longer after that, it goes totally wild, out of control.

So you've got to learn how to bring it under control yourself. Learn how to moderate it. If you're going to gain a place of just right, it has to come from the path, this practice we're doing. As Ajaan Mun once said, it's normal that when the mind starts on the path it's going to go from one extreme to the other. But you've got to learn from the extremes to see how you can bring things back to the middle. And a good place to learn about this is at the breath.

The texts say that there are five factors that go into the first jhana: directed thought, evaluation, singleness of preoccupation, pleasure, and rapture. Ajaan Lee makes a really useful observation about them, that the first three—directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation—are the causes. Those are the factors you can do, whereas the other two factors are results. So you focus on trying to keep the mind with one object. You direct it, say, to the breath. And the really important factor in all of this is evaluation, learning how to gain a sense of what's just right for the body, what kind of breathing is just right for the mind; what, when you're out of balance, can bring things back into balance. Experiment. If you breathed a little bit longer, what would the results be? Then, when you've tried long breathing for a while, you might try even longer. Or you might try shorter.

Evaluation here involves three things: One, try to figure out what changes you can make. Two, learn how to evaluate the results of those changes to see what's working well and what's not. Then three: when things are going well, how do you make the most use of the sense of ease and rapture that can come when things are going well?

To begin with, it's good to remember there are lots of ways you can conceive the breath, and they'll give you different ideas of what the possibilities are. If you think of the breath only as air pumping in and out of the lungs, there's just a limited range of possibilities. If you think of it more as breath energy, that widens the range because the breath energy can come in and out at any spot of the body and can permeate every part of the body. Ajaan Fuang once talked about the breath in the bones. Have you ever looked at the breath in your bones? There's also breath energy surrounding the body, like a cocoon. Is that cocoon of energy in good shape? Can you sense it? Some people can, some people can't right off. But as you get more and more sensitive to the breath energy in the body, you realize it is there and you can tell when there's a rip or a tear in the breath energy surrounding the body. And you can think of healing it.

So that's the first part of evaluation: thinking of the breath in different ways to see which way is most helpful right now. You might think of what Ajaan Lee calls the up-flowing breath, which is the breath coming up from the base of the spine up through the head, and goes out the top of the head. Or you can think of it coming from the soles of your feet up to the top of the head, supporting the body so that you're not slouching down as you sit. Or you might find that the breath energy flowing up from the body is getting stuck in your head. Hakuin, the famous Zen monk, talks about suffering from Zen sickness. Basically it was breath energy getting stuck in his head. To counteract it, he'd visualize a ball of butter on the top of his head melting down over the body. That was how he brought the energy back down.

You might also think of the breath energy coming in and out the palms of your hands or the soles of your feet. If there's a tightness or heaviness, say, in your chest, think of it flowing out your arms and out the palms of your hands. If there's a tension in your hips, think of the energy flowing down through the hips and out the soles of your feet. In other words, this part of evaluation has to do with your ingenuity in conceiving the breath energy and what you can do with it.

The next step is actually learning how to read the results of what you've done. Sometimes you can get stuck on very subtle breathing, which may seem very still, very relaxing, very calming, and you stick with it sometimes for days on end. What it can sometimes do, though, is to drain the energy in the body.

Years ago, Yom Thaem, an old woman who had been studying with Ajaan

Fuang, came to stay at the monastery. As we were sitting in meditation one evening, he called out to her. "You've been stuck on cool breathing now for weeks," he said. "It's not good for you"—cool breathing here meaning a very subtle, very still, very relaxed level of breath. Sometimes it's good to breathe in a way that's relaxing, but other times you've got to find a way of breathing that's more energizing. You've got to learn how to read what your body needs.

Ajaan Lee compares it to being a good parent. When your child cries, you know what the child needs. You learn how to read the cry and you have different ways of dealing with the child—picking it up, walking around, giving it something to eat, putting it in a swing, whatever you sense is going to work. The more familiar you are with your child, the more you can read the cries. And the same with the breath: When things aren't going well with the body, you want to observe *why* they're not going well: Exactly what kind of not going well is this? Too much energy? Too little energy? Is the breath flowing up too much or down too much? Is the breath energy dead and lifeless? Or is it too scattered? Then try to think of ways of bringing it back into balance. Then, again, you read what you've got: Is it working? If it's not working, try something else.

This also means, however, learning how to read how long you need to stick with something before you can evaluate the results. Sometimes you can tell immediately. You try a certain way of breathing and can know right away that it's not right for the body. Other times it takes a while. Back when I had migraines, I found that really deep forceful breathing could be very helpful. It didn't feel comfortable at first but after a while I began to notice that it really was having a good effect on the body. So I stuck with it until it had done its work, and then I let things relax. So sometimes you can't tell right away what's going to work and what's not. But this is one of the reasons why we sit and meditate so long, so that we'll have time to experiment.

When you sense that the results are going the way you want, that's when you come to the third aspect of evaluation, which is how to make the most use of these good results, how to maintain them. Say there's a sense of ease and wellbeing in the middle of the chest: How do you maintain that ease and wellbeing? What way do you breathe? How do you adjust your breath so as to maintain that sense all way through the in-breath, all the way through the out?

Once you can do that, how do you let that sense of ease spread through the different parts of the body? Where are the channels where it can spread? What

kind of spreading forces things too much and spoils the whole effect? In other words how much allowing is involved, and how much actually opening things up and consciously spreading do you need to do? These are questions only you can answer for yourself. No one else can answer them for you.

So these are the three aspects of evaluation. You start with using your ingenuity in thinking of different ways of working with the breath and working with the mind—i.e., focusing on different parts of the body, noticing how much pressure you need to exert in order to keep the focus there, how much pressure is too much, how much pressure is not enough. Then you learn how to read the results of what you're doing, to read the situation you're starting out with, and to read when you're getting good results and when you're not. And then three, when you do get good results, use your ingenuity to figure out what you can do with them: how you can maximize them so that the mind can stay still and balanced for a long period of time, how to keep the mind clear so that you can get the higher benefits of concentration, i.e., the discernment that can come when things are very clear in the mind, with a strong foundation of mindfulness and alertness. It's a lot easier to keep the breath in mind throughout the day when the breath feels really good. You can walk around and just be filled with a sense of just that: fullness. When you do that, you find it a lot easier to stay centered in the body. The mind is not really interested in going off anywhere else because it feels so gratified.

So this factor of evaluation is the really important one in getting all the other factors of first jhana together. If you evaluate the breath in a way that makes it more comfortable, and the sensation of the breathing more interesting, it's a lot easier to keep your mind focused on the breath and to stay there, to maintain a sense of singleness, which means both having one object in mind and then having that one object or that one perception fill the whole range of your awareness, throughout the body and even around the body, including the cocoon of energy outside. The sign that your evaluation is going well is that the sense of fullness in the body becomes more and more pronounced, with a sense of ease, wellbeing, pleasure simply in being here with the breath, being here in the body, letting all the different breath channels in the body connect so that everything in the body feels unified.

All of this depends on how carefully you do this process of evaluation, how you bring your powers of observation to bear. Some people have said that the factor of evaluation is simply the wobbling of the mind because your

concentration isn't solid enough, but that's not really the case. You need to do this evaluation to get the mind and its object snugly together, so that they're on good terms with each other. And as Ajaan Fuang would say, once things are just right, you reach the point where you realize you don't need to evaluate things any more. The breath is just right coming in, just right going out, and you can't really improve it. His image is of a large water jar like they have in Thailand, where they collect the rain water coming off the roofs of houses. He said you fill up the water jar, and it gets to the point where it's so full you can't really add any more. If you try adding more water, it just spills out. The jar can't get any more full than that. That's the point where you can let the evaluation go and just become one with the breath. The awareness fills the body; the breath fills the body. That sense of oneness can take you all the way to the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. But to get to that, you've first got to evaluate things to get everything fitting snugly together and well-connected together inside.

I once made the mistake one time, when talking to someone in Thailand, of saying that it's like a dog lying down. I shouldn't have used a dog to make a comparison with the mind in concentration, but I thought it was a good image. The dog lies down, and oops, there's a rock. So he gets up and scratches away the rock. Then he lies down again. Oops, there's a root. Okay, he scratches at the root. And then when everything is smooth, he settles down.

It's the same with the breath. You scratch here, you scratch there, and you finally get everything nice, smoothed out, and comfortable. Then the mind can really settle down and really be at one. It's this scratching around to make things just right and keep them just right: That's the evaluation.

So try to do as precise and observant a job as you can with this evaluation, and the results will just keep getting better and better.

Rapture

August 22, 2011

Take a few deep, long in-and-out breaths and think of the breath energy filling the body. When we talk of the breath energy being full, it's not a matter of having your lungs stuffed with air. It's more that the energy channels throughout the body are open and they feel saturated with comfortable energy. So try to notice where in the body you have that sense of fullness right now. Protect that spot as you breathe in; protect it as you breathe out. Don't squeeze it. Don't pull it. Think of it floating in mid-air right there. Some people feel this sense of potential fullness most easily in their hands. Other people feel it most easily in their chest. It really varies from person to person where you're going to feel it first.

Once you notice that there's an area that does feel relatively full of nice energy, think of it spreading out from that spot. This is something you can't push or pull. You *allow* it to spread at its own rate. Tell yourself you're in no hurry. You don't have to anticipate how soon it's going to happen, how long it's going to take. It's something that happens right on the cusp of the present moment. So if you're leaning too much into the future, you're not going to see it. If you're leaning back into the past, you're not going to see it. Try to think of yourself being balanced right here. The image the Buddha gives is of a mustard seed on the tip of an awl, like an extremely sharp nail.

Now, developing this sense of fullness, this sense of wellbeing, requires that you pay very careful attention to the breath and that you be very meticulous in how you evaluate the breath. How is it feeling right now? When you breathe in, does the breath energy spread smoothly or does it feel like you're pushing or pulling it too much? What we're working on here is something that's called *piti* in Pali. You can translate it as rapture; you can translate it as fullness; you can translate it as refreshment. The basic meaning is that it feels really good, really nourishing. The Buddha lists it as one of the energizing factors of awakening.

It's also a kind of food. There's that passage where he says that, when we meditate, we feed on rapture like the radiant gods. The problem with the word *rapture* is that sometimes it seems too intense for the way some people experience it. Some people feel it as a tingling through the body, their hair

standing on end. For others, it's gentler—a sense of balanced, full wellbeing. Some people feel it in waves coming over the body. And for some people it's so intense that the body starts moving.

The intensity is not a measure of the intensity of your concentration. It's more a measure of how starved of energy the body's been feeling. If it's been feeling really starved, the sense of rapture is going to be extremely intense. If the body hasn't been starved, the rapture or refreshment will be more gentle. Sometimes you may want it to be intense but it's not going to be intense, but that doesn't matter. Be very patient with it. Again, if you start pushing it too much, it withers up. Have a strong sense of *allowing* the energy to be there and to radiate out. If it's going to spread, it's going to spread at its own rate. You just try to maintain your balance right there on the cusp of the present and it'll do its own thing.

This is a really necessary part of meditation. Ajaan Fuang used to say that your mind is like a machine that needs lubricant. Otherwise it's going to dry up. Your practice gets dry if there's no sense of real refreshment and wellbeing. That's what rapture is: lubricant for your meditation. He talked about being alone up in the forest for years in Northern Thailand, missing Ajaan Lee. And what kept him going through the day each day was his ability to tap into a sense of rapture whenever he needed it.

Realize that rapture is waiting here for you in the present moment. Just look very carefully and give it some space. In the beginning, it might not seem like much, but you've got to give it a chance. It's like that old fable of the mouse and the lion. The lion catches the mouse, but the mouse promises the lion that if he lets him go, maybe someday he'll save the lion's life. The lion is amused and so lets the mouse go. After a while, the lion is caught in a net, and the mouse comes and eats away at the net, freeing the lion.

So don't disparage little things, don't disparage weak things—because they can grow. They can get stronger. Wherever in the body there's a feeling of "okay," allow it to stay okay. Protect it. Ajaan Fuang would use the word *prakhong*, which means to hover around something to protect it. Try to develop that same attitude of hovering around these sensations in the body. Don't push them or squeeze them too much. Give them their space. Just protect them so that nothing comes in and steps on them.

As for any questions the mind may have about how long this is going to take or how much longer we're going to be sitting here, just drop them, drop

them, drop them. Let them fall away. Try to find a sense of balance right here, because right here is where all the good things happen—and where all the important things happen as well. If you can nourish and protect this sense of fullness, then you begin to notice any movements of the mind that might disturb it. You see where the mind is hungry and how it often goes out to look for what's basically junk food to assuage its hunger. Now, however, you realize you don't have to do that, for you've got something really nice and nourishing right here. Why go out and look for trouble?

Greed, aversion, and delusion are all looking for trouble. They're like strong attacks of hunger and they're never really satisfied. When you act on these things, they may provide a little bit of fullness and a little bit of energy, but then it goes. It's like food that's bad for your health. But here's something that you've been carrying around with you all the time: the potentials in the body. Ajaan Lee talks about this a lot—that the body has all kinds of potentials that we rarely take advantage of because we don't let the mind get quiet enough for them to show themselves. So give this potential—this potential for fullness, a sense of refreshment—some space; give it some time. You'll find that it really can strengthen your practice and give you a source of energy that you can tap into whenever you need it at any time throughout the day. Whether you're in formal meditation or not, these potentials are always there. When you can recognize them and learn how to allow them to grow, you'll have a constant source of food, a constant source of energy that you can take with you wherever you go.

Truth

April 21, 2011

Ajaan Lee often made the point that our practice is a skill. The Dhamma is all about skill. The words are there to help us master the skill, to understand the problems we face in mastering the skill, and understand the various approaches we might take to solve those problems. But the words are not the Dhamma; the words point to the Dhamma. The genuine Dhamma is something we have to do. One of the old meanings of the word Dhamma is "action." To see Dhamma in this sense, we have to look at our actions very directly, very carefully, to see where they're skillful and where they're not.

This is why you see a lot of analogies to skills in both Ajaan Lee's teachings and in the Buddha's. The Buddha compared a skillful meditator to a skillful archer, cook, or carpenter. Ajaan Lee would say that as we develop directed thought and evaluation in the practice, it's basically learning how to observe our actions and their results, and to figure out what's going wrong. He would compare it to learning how to weave a basket, sew a shirt, or make clay tiles. Remember this as you're reading and listening to the Dhamma: The Dhamma isn't just a matter of understanding the words as you listen. Ajaan Lee once said that if you wanted to explain the Dhamma at the level of being able to remember the main points, it wouldn't take three hours. But then, taking just one of those points, it might take three years to really understand it as you put it into practice.

So the Dhamma is not something to just memorize. It's something you actually have to do and observe. This is why the Buddha said that truthfulness is one of the primary requirements of practice. It involves two things. One is being honest about what you're actually doing and the results you're actually getting. The other meaning of truthfulness is sticking to something once you've made up your mind that it's what's really worthwhile to do. The two qualities go together: Once you've noticed that something seems clearly and truly good, then you stick with it without betraying your knowledge or your understanding, until you get the true results you're after.

You have to be true in order to learn the truth. Then, you take that truth and continue to be true to really benefit from it. For a lot of us, the thought of "honesty" means being honest about our shortcomings. That's one side of

honesty. It's a painful side. And there's another painful side: being honest about our capabilities that we haven't fully developed. We could make more of ourselves. That was the honesty that drove the Buddha on this path. As a prince, he had power, wealth, and all kinds of sensual pleasures. According to traditional accounts, the people around him kept asking, "What more could you want? Think of all the great people in the past. This is how they lived their lives. Why can't you?" The Buddha responded, "That's a sign that they weren't really great or admirable. They weren't worthy of honor or respect." Truly great people are the ones who check to see if they have a greater capacity within themselves and explore that capacity by pushing the envelope.

That's what the Buddha did and that's why he found the Dhamma. He would look at his actions and ask himself, "Am I suffering?" When the answer was Yes, the next question was, "What am I doing that might be causing that suffering?" He had to look honestly at what he was doing and the results that he was getting. Then he had to ask himself, "Is there an alternative way of doing this? Is this all a human being can do, or is there something better, something more?" He stretched his imagination and would try out any promising approaches to see if they actually worked.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha regarded truthfulness as the most important virtue, both in the sense of speaking truly and in the sense of not betraying your knowledge or your understanding. All the precepts come down to this quality of truthfulness. You observe that you've been harming people—yourself or others—and you want to stop, and then you make up your mind to stick with that determination. Precepts aren't commands. The Buddha isn't forcing them on you. You have to see for yourself that it really would be better to give up harmful actions. It's a promise you make to yourself. Once you make it, you want to be true to that promise.

If you start lying to yourself or betraying your knowledge, it sets up a long series of other ways you have to lie to yourself. It's the same when you lie to other people: You tell one lie and then you have to cover up that lie with another lie, then a third lie, and then a fourth. It gets very tricky and very complicated, for after a while you forget who you told which lie to. It's a lot simpler just to stick with the truth. "Okay, I do have these shortcomings, but I also have these potentials." It's by being true that the potentials open up.

The Buddha placed great emphasis on this virtue of truthfulness. It's one of the reasons why he said that people who feel no shame in telling a lie are

capable of any kind of evil. This doesn't mean that everybody who lies is capable of all kinds of evil. There are people who will feel ashamed about the lies they tell, which shows that they know some boundaries, that they have a sense of right and wrong. The people who feel no shame at all are the ones you have to watch out for. It's especially troubling when you hear somebody say, "There are circumstances where a lie is perfectly acceptable." They'll give extreme examples where if you don't tell a lie, somebody might die. Then they turn it into a principle that lies can be okay in circumstances that are far less drastic. But even in the drastic cases, can you be sure that telling a lie will save the person's life? Some people are very poor liars. More importantly, what kind of person feels no shame in justifying the telling of a lie? A shameless person. If you feel that lying can be okay, then you're capable of any evil.

So you want to make sure that you take refuge in the truth. Ajaan Maha Boowa once said that if you hold to what's true, then the truth holds no danger for you. When you pretend or make false assumptions, then the truth becomes a threat. When you begin to practice and look at where you're suffering, you notice certain things that you hold on to that cause you to be fearful and to feel threatened. Look into the truth of these assumptions. "Is this really true? Is this really mine?" These are cases where the perception of not-self is crucial as a tool for letting go of the things that make you feel threatened by the truth. When you can let go of those things, the threat goes away.

The result is that the more honest you are with yourself about your shortcomings and strengths, the better your sense of yourself. *Attaññuta* is the Buddha's term for this. This takes time and requires truthfulness. Having a sense of yourself means knowing your strengths and weaknesses, the areas you have to fix and/or improve, and also what areas or qualities of the mind you can depend on to make those improvements. To be honest with yourself and about yourself doesn't mean saying, "I'm miserable and I accept the fact. Maybe I can be okay with this." That's not what the Buddha asked for or recommended. He recommended knowing your strengths as well as your weaknesses. Make a clear evaluation here. The clearer you are about this, then the easier the path will become.

The Buddha asked two things of a person who came to study with him: that the person be both observant and truthful. Those two qualities go together. The more truthful you are in general, the more you can begin to trust your

observations as to what's true or what's not, what's worthwhile or what's not. In that way, the truth becomes your refuge. Your truthfulness becomes your refuge. Otherwise, how are you going to know what's skillful and what's not? How are you going to know whom you can trust and whom you can't? You have two basic sources of knowledge: what you gain from other people, and what you gain from yourself. Both have to be tested through the truthfulness in your own powers of observation and in the thoroughness to which you put the teachings to a fair test.

That's why the truth is your ultimate refuge: the truth of your own heart and mind. Ajaan Lee once said, "If you aren't true, then the Buddha's teachings won't be true for you, and you'll never know what the Buddha's teachings truly are." Turn that around. If you're true, then the Buddha's teachings *will* be true for you, and you *do* have a chance of knowing what they are. That's where honesty has its more than pleasant side: first, when you can say that you honestly want to learn the Dhamma, and then when you can honestly say that you know the Buddha's teachings about true happiness, the ultimate happiness, are true.

Your Mind is Lying to You

September 15, 2010

There's a *Calvin and Hobbes*cartoon where Calvin's sitting on a sled at the top of the hill and he's thinking, "Go ahead, go down the hill, you won't run into that boulder, you won't run into that stream, it's not too steep." And in the last panel he turns and says to the reader, "My brain is trying to kill me."

And that's one of the main problems in life: Your mind is trying to kill you. If not kill you physically, it's trying to kill your goodness, kill your possibility for really getting anywhere in the practice. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how when he was a young monk he was afraid to go out and practice for fear that it would be wasted energy. There was a belief in those days that the time for jhana had passed, the time for nirvana had passed, and he was afraid any effort in that direction would be wasted. He got over the fear by realizing that whatever the Buddha taught was not meant to be an executioner of your happiness. Whatever's required of the path, whether it's easy, whether it's difficult: It's all good.

And it's not that progress happens only when the path is easy or only when you're enjoying it. There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about how some things are good in the present, good in the future; good in the present, bad in the future; bad in the present, good in the future; bad in the present and bad in the future. The one that's bad in the present but good in the future, he says, is the case where a person is practicing the Dhamma, leading the holy life, thoroughly miserable, tears running down his cheeks, but he's willing to stick with it.

In cases like that, the mind has lots of ways of pulling you away, and you have to watch out for them, learn how to catch the mind when it's lying to you. Sometimes it comes as psychotherapy, saying, "Forcing yourself is bad for you, you know. It's unhealthy," and all the jargon that therapists have cooked up to keep people from exerting themselves, to keep them happy with a life that really is not worth being happy with.

Like the therapist I was talking to up in Vancouver last year: He was working in a storefront that offers psychological counseling to drug addicts. And he was telling me that for years they had trouble just getting people to come in off the street for free therapy. They found the one approach that

worked to at least pull the people into the storefront was to help them work on their self-esteem. But the problem was that they ended up with clients who had high self-esteem but were still on drugs. They were perfectly okay now with taking drugs; they didn't feel bad about themselves for taking drugs. And the therapist was beginning to realize that this was not an advance. It was actually a setback.

There's a lot of that in psychotherapy. Therapists will tell you that there are a lot of fellow therapists who are afraid they're going to lose their clients, so they tell the clients whatever they think the clients want to hear. And because psychotherapy claims to be a science, it begins to sound scientific. So we have to watch out for that.

People even use the Dhamma as a way of lying to themselves, using the wrong Dhamma at the wrong time. There's a classic case of that in the four-volume novel, *Joseph and His Brothers.* Joseph has been working as a slave in charge of Potiphar's house, and Potiphar's wife has been trying to seduce him for an entire volume of the novel. And you think he's been able to steer clear of her, but then one day the whole family goes out for a holiday that requires everybody to go over to the west side of the river for ceremonies at the tombs. When they come back home, there's going to be a big dinner. And Potiphar's wife lets it be known that she's not feeling well, so she's going to stay home alone in the house. At first, Joseph goes over with the group to the west side of the river but then he starts telling himself, "Gee, as a responsible steward here I really ought to go check the arrangements back at the house." This is followed with a long series of little maxims that he repeats to himself to convince himself that that's his duty to go back. So, as a fool, he ends up going back and Potiphar's wife attacks him physically. He's able to get away but she has his cloak in her hand: the evidence that he tried to rape her. It's because of that that he has to go into prison—all out of a false sense of duty.

So you have to watch out for the voice in the mind that says, "Well, you'd really be better off, you've got this duty, you've got that duty." But is it genuinely your duty? That's one of the most seductive ways the mind has of lying to itself.

This is why, when you meditate, you have to learn how to say No to every thought that comes up. It's your first line of defense. That means not just putting it aside but questioning it. "Is that really true? Is that so? Is that so?" you could ask. And then watch. Try to keep the mind in position with the breath or just

with the sense of the body in the present moment, staying outside of your thought-worlds. And remember the old principle, Don't believe everything you think. Because it's very rarely that we fall for just raw desire. Desires have their reasons.

This was an old problem in ancient philosophy. Plato said that reason and desire are two totally separate functions of the mind. But then the Stoics noticed that, no, if you can reason with your desires or reason can win out over desires, you're not winning out through sheer force. If desires actually listen to reason, it means they have reasons of their own. And often they won't tell you what their real reasons are. They're like politicians. They wave a flag over here so they can do their dirty work over there. If you really love yourself, really care for yourself, really want to put an end to suffering, you have to learn to recognize the red herrings, the distractions, the good-seeming reasons that are actually going to lead you astray.

Often they're in terms of abstractions. This is one way you can recognize them. The Buddha didn't deal with abstractions. He dealt with actions, specific actions. This action: What is it going to lead to? That action: What is it going to lead to? Where does it tend? If you get pulled off into abstractions, you get pulled further and further away from the actual mental act of seeing the connection between the action and the result.

This is why a lot of meditation is a matter of staying under the radar. Abstractions are flying through the air but you stay down close to the ground. Just watch: When I think in this way, what's the tone in the body? What's the tone in the mind? Where is this leading? Which of my defilements wants me to believe this? It's like that old way of protecting yourself when you're reading magazines or newspapers: "Somebody wants me to believe this. Why?" That way, you don't get entirely pulled in by a skewed way of thinking.

This is one of the most valuable gifts of the practice: It gives you a place here with the breath where you can step back and watch your thought-worlds in terms of cause and effect. This is how the Buddha himself said he got onto the path. After realizing that jhana was one of the factors of the path, he had to work on right resolve, i.e., training his mind to see what kind of thoughts lead toward concentration and what kind of thoughts lead away from concentration. In the same way, you look at your thoughts in terms of cause and effect. To what extent are they bringing the mind to a sense of wellbeing or ease? Of course, sometimes the path to that ease is going to be hard. The Buddha never

said it's going to be easy all along the way. You have to keep an eye toward the long-term results of what you're doing.

So the concentration, as you're working at it, develops a set of skills that enable you to gauge what's being said in the mind, so that you can figure out who's lying to you and who's telling the truth. Who has your best interests in mind and who doesn't? Remember that image of Ajaan Lee's, of all kinds of beings—germs and whatnot—in your bloodstream. A thought goes through your brain and maybe it's the thought of one of those little beings going through the bloodstream around your brain. Thinking in this way reminds you that you don't have to identify with everything that comes up in the mind or gets lodged in the body as an emotion.

I've been reading about the Romantics and the Transcendentalists, how they really had a strong respect for the mind's intuitions and they gave them absolute authority. That's dangerous. You can't give absolute authority to anything. You have to test everything, and test the way you test things, and in the testing you try to develop the ability to judge more and more reliably. This is why we take refuge in the Buddha to begin with, because we need someone as an example—someone with whose example we can compare our thoughts or actions or our words until we reach the point where we really can depend on ourselves.

So if anything's pulling you away from the practice, remember: It's lying to you. And it's not going to present itself simply as raw desire. It's going to have its reasons, some of which sound very smooth and convincing. One of the skills you have to develop as a meditator is to learn how to see through that.

One of Ajaan Fuang's traits that really struck me when I first met him was how skeptical he was. He wasn't willing to jump to conclusions, either believing or not believing. He'd watch and he'd watch some more and he'd watch some more. That's how to prevent even your insights from getting hijacked by your defilements. When an insight comes in, pride can arise around it—which is why Upasika Kee Nanayon always advised that whenever an insight comes, watch to see what happens next and what happens next, and then what happens next. Ajaan Lee's test would be if you gain an insight, ask yourself: To what extent is what you just learned true? To what extent is its opposite true? It's this ability to step back and watch that's so important, so that ultimately you can see through to the truth.

Encouraging Perceptions

November 23, 2010

When we meditate, we're working with the process of perception. When we focus on the sensation of the breathing, we're also keeping in mind a particular perception of the breath so that we know what to look for, where to look for the breath. For example, if you have a perception of breath simply as air coming in and out of the lungs, you're going to be looking in one place and seeing one kind of thing. If you change your perception and think of the breath as energy flow in the body, you're going to be looking other places, seeing other things.

Perception is also used in gaining insight. Sometimes you hear that concentration basically deals with the perception or the mental label of something, whereas when you're developing insight you're dealing with the actual experience, but that's not the case. The two go together, the perception and the experience, both in concentration practice and in insight practice. When you're trying to concentrate, you use the perception of the breath to direct you to the experience of the breath and to keep you there. When you're starting to develop a sense of dispassion, you use the perception of inconstancy, or the perception of stress, or the perception of not-self. These are mental labels and you're applying them to things you're experiencing.

One of the important lessons you learn from meditation is the power of perception, how it can shape your experience: what you sense in your world of experience, both inside the body and around you; where you're going to focus your attention and what you're going to do with it; your sense of your possibilities, of what can be done. Again, if you think of the breath as simply the air coming in and out of the lungs, there's a limited range of possibilities for what you can do. The idea of allowing the in-and-out breath to stop gets kind of scary. But if you think of the breath energy flowing throughout the body, extending out to all the pores, then the idea of the in-and-out breath stopping is not so scary. If you think of yourself as starved of breath, you have to keep gulping it in. You're going to breathe in a way that's not very conducive to getting the mind to settle down. But if you develop a perception of the body being filled with breath energy, then the in-breath is just connecting with what's already there, energizing what's already there, and you're going to

breathe in a different way, with a lot less desperation, with a greater sense of fullness and ease. What's called the bodily fabrication aspect of the in-and-out breath has an impact on the movement of energy in the body, and the way you feel the body is going to get more and more subtle, more conducive to the mind's settling down.

All these perceptions are true to some extent, it's just that some of them are more useful than others, more beneficial, for some purposes and not for others. For the purpose of meditating, you want to hold onto a perception that's right for what you're doing right now. In this way, the perceptions you hold in the mind are a kind of mental chatter, a kind of inner speech—the words that go into the sentences of your directed thought and evaluation—and the same principles apply to inner speech as the Buddha applies to outer speech. In other words, before speaking, you have to ask yourself three questions. The first question is, is it true? There are all kinds of things that are true. So, the next question is, is it beneficial? Is it really good to say these things? Is it really good to hold these perceptions? What use do they have? What impact do they have on the mind? Even though they may be true, if they're not having a beneficial impact on the mind, you might want to let them go. But even if they're beneficial, the next question is, is this the right time and place for them? Is this the time for comforting perceptions or is this the time for perceptions that crack the whip?—the ones that say, "Hey, you've got to get to work." These are the sorts of things you learn through experience. But for the purposes of the meditation right now, you want to hold to a perception of the breath that allows the mind to settle down, so that it doesn't have to think a lot about breathing in, breathing out. You want perceptions that simply *allow* the breath to come in, *allow* it to go out.

So, a perception of the ease of the breath, the fullness of the breath is very helpful. At the same time, you need some useful perceptions about your own mind. You have to be convinced that you can do this. As Ven. Ananda said, this is a form of conceit, but it's a healthy form of conceit. You hear that other people have gained awakening and you tell yourself, "They're human beings. I'm a human being. They can do it, so can I." But sometimes you're fighting some perceptions you've carried over from the past that tend to undercut that kind of self-confidence. So again, this is a question: However true they may have been, are they beneficial right now? No. So you've got to figure out ways to let them go.

Ajaan Mun would do this with his students. He himself was the son of a peasant; most of his students were peasants' sons, and peasants in Thailand are way down on the social ladder. The message coming out of Bangkok in those days was that if you wanted to get anywhere in the Buddha's teachings, you had to go to Bangkok and study with the experts there: Bangkok people from the royal family, people from educated backgrounds. If you're just a peasant son meditating out under the trees, what would you know? A lot of people in the countryside had internalized that message, so Ajaan Mun's first task was to counteract it. One of his frequent teachings was, "What do you need in order to practice? You need a human birth: you've got that. You need the 32 parts of the body. Sometimes you don't have to have all 32 functioning properly, but you've got a human body and you've got a human mind. You've got what it takes." You see this repeated again and again in his teachings. He had to build up the confidence of his students, and Yes: Even though they were peasants and had had minimal education, they had enough. They had what it takes. This is why we have the Wilderness Tradition. They were able to overcome the messages that society had been sending to them.

You need confidence in order to do this. One helpful perception is not to think of yourself as a unitary self, but as many selves. You've had many desires. Each desire has its own set of selves, the self that's going to gain the desired pleasure and then the self that can manage things to produce that pleasure. Now, in many areas of life, we may not have many skills, in which case that second kind of self may be pretty underdeveloped. But you have to think about the fact that you do have some skills, there are some things that you do well, and so think of those as the strong members of your committee. Then learn to take the lessons they've learned in managing things skillfully and apply them to your meditation. This is a skill that requires time, requires patience, so that we can comprehend suffering, let go of its cause, develop the path so that we can experience or verify for ourselves that there is a cessation to suffering. The hard part here is comprehending the pain, because pain, both physical and emotional, is something we tend to run away from. Who wants to sit around with pain long enough so you can comprehend it? So you need skills. You need strengthening factors.

This is what the path is all about, from right view all the way down to right concentration. The factors of the path are there to strengthen you, to encourage you, to give you the skills you need to sit with suffering, sit with pain, and

understand it. So, again, whatever perceptions, whatever ways of talking to yourself that are true but may not be beneficial, or may not be timely, you've got to learn how to drop them.

Sometimes you have a big investment in them and sometimes they've been drummed into your head so long you can't think of any other alternative. That's when you've got to remember that you do have skills, you do have abilities, so focus on those, build on your strengths. Again, don't perceive yourself just as a unitary being. You've got all these committee members in here, so try to figure out which ones are skillful, which ones are going to be helpful right now, and encourage them so that you have the strength to look at your suffering.

This is why we work so much on concentration, because the concentration develops a sense of ease, a sense of rapture, a sense of stability. It's nourishing for the mind, strengthening for the mind.

There are also other objects of concentration beside the breath, meditation exercises that can be helpful when you need them. For example, reflection on your own generosity, reflection on your own virtue, recollection of the Sangha, remembering all those monks and nuns who went through a lot of difficulties. Some of them were on the verge of suicide and yet they were able to pull themselves together and ultimately gain awakening. That's encouraging. They could do it, why can't you? Any of the contemplations that you find encouraging and strengthening, you've got to learn how to develop them. If there's a nagging voice in the back of the mind that says, "Well, that may be true of them but it's not really true of me," you've got to recognize that voice for what it is, something that's unbeneficial, and only telling part of the truth, for a purpose you can't trust. You may have some weaknesses but you've also got strengths. Don't let the cynic take over, because the cynic wants to destroy you. It doesn't want to practice. It's a member of the committee that you can't allow to have any power. You need to learn how to undermine its power so that it doesn't get in the way of the strengthening exercises that we do as we practice, as we meditate, as we develop mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment.

All these things are meant to help us comprehend suffering so that we can understand how it comes, how it goes, and realize where the cause is. There may be a lot of causes coming from outside, but the things that really harm us, that really hurt us, are the ways we cause ourselves to suffer. Sometimes that's hard to admit to yourself, but that's another reason why you need inner

strength: so you can look at your own feelings and not get knocked off course by them, not get overwhelmed by them. It helps to realize that everybody does this, everybody's harming themselves, causing themselves suffering; the only people who aren't are arahants.

So we're all in this together. But we don't have to stay here.

The sense of accomplishment that comes when the mind can settle down, the sense of ease that comes: These are all things that help you to step back, to look at the ways in which the unskillful members of your committee have been causing a lot of trouble. One of the uses of the not-self teaching is learning how to dis-identify with these members, to watch them simply as patterns of behavior, old conversations, old movies, old habits that you haven't had a real chance to look at carefully, but now you can. You want to develop the imagination that helps you think of other ways of dealing with a particular problem so that you don't have to make yourself suffer. That's when you see that the type of behavior you're doing is causing yourself suffering, and also that it's not necessary. After all, it's just a type of action. It's not built into your essence. There are alternatives. When you see them, that's when you can really let go.

This requires patience. It requires endurance. It requires self-confidence. Any perceptions that help in this project of giving you more strength are the ones you want to hold onto. Those are the ones you want to develop. That way you'll have the confidence that, like Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Mun's students, you can do it, too. After all, they were human beings with a lot of strikes against them but they were able to take to heart the fact that they were causing themselves to suffer and that the path to the end of suffering was something everybody can follow. Those are good perceptions to keep in mind.

Broad, Tall, & Deep

October 6, 2010

When Ajaan Fuang was teaching people to meditate, they'd get to the point where the breath stopped, with a sense of the breath energy filling the body, all the pores of the skin wide open, and all the breath channels in the body connected. Once you had attained that state, he'd have you stay there for a while to get used to being there and to get good at maintaining a subtle perception. Then he'd have you focus on the sensation of space. You'd begin to realize that the space you were focusing on had no limitations. When you're focused on the body, things go out to the skin, or maybe just a little bit beyond the skin, to include the energy cocoon around the body. But with space, there are no limits.

After you were used to staying with that perception of space, Ajaan Fuang would then have you focus on the awareness of the space, which likewise had no limits. There was just the perception of knowing, knowing, knowing.

Ordinarily, he'd have you wait until your concentration was strong so you could stay with these perceptions, and the mind would have the precision, stability, and strength needed to stay with them for a long period of time. But they're useful perceptions to keep in mind even before you reach that level of strength in your concentration. When the body feels weak, you can remind yourself that there's an awareness that's larger than the body, one whose energy doesn't need to depend on the body. When things in your life seem to be crowding in, you can remember that there's an awareness that's larger than all of those things. Keeping that perception in mind, you can get in touch with that dimension for at least some period of time, and that's helpful in a lot of ways.

One, it helps stir up whatever energy you need just to hang on, to stick with things regardless of how bad they are, either in the body or in the world around you.

It also gives you a place to stand where you can simply be aware of whatever comes up. Sometimes things will come up in the meditation and you won't be sure whether they're good or bad, so you want to be able to step back and say, "Let's just observe these things for a while." A larger observer is a really good place to go, because it helps remind you that when you're going to watch something, you want to watch it 360 degrees. You want to look all

around you, from every angle, especially when something comes up in the mind and you want to see its effects. You want your awareness to be as broad as possible.

So it's good to practice with that perception. This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Fuang would have his students chant *The Divine Mantra,* because it gets you used to thinking in terms of the properties of the body, along with the properties of space and consciousness. You get more and more familiar with these concepts and find it easier to stay with your perception of whatever sensations might correspond to space, whatever sense of awareness or aspect of your awareness seems to be large. You can take that as your safe spot. It's a good foundation.

The Buddha talks about this enlarged awareness in terms of several dimensions. He talks about making the mind broad and expansive. He talks about making it tall and high. He talks about making it deep. For *broad* and *expansive,* he basically talks about two things. One is developing the *brahma-viharas:* limitless goodwill, limitless compassion, limitless empathetic joy, limitless equanimity. He compares these attitudes to a large river. When people say really nasty things to you, you want to develop a sense of goodwill that's as expansive as the River Ganges, that no amount of nastiness can destroy. You want to cherish this goodwill as a mother would her only child—this ability to keep this determination in mind that you'll always act on goodwill, regardless. When the mind is like the River Ganges, it's imperturbable. Suppose a man came along, saying he was going to get all the water out of the River Ganges, and he took a torch, hoping to burn it all up, to evaporate all the water. As the Buddha says, the man would just wear himself out before all the water was gone.

So you want to develop that kind of goodwill, a goodwill that nothing can evaporate away. You want your goodwill not to be dependent on other people's being lovable or nice. When you can do that, it's not a case of your giving them something they don't deserve. You have to remember that *you* benefit from your goodwill. You want to make sure that goodwill informs all of your intentions, all of your motivations, so that you don't end up creating a lot of unskillful kamma. When we talk about limitless or immeasurable goodwill, it doesn't mean just that there are no outside limits to it; it also means that there are no conditions placed on it. Whenever it's appropriate, that's what you act on.

Now, there are also times when you have to develop equanimity. Regardless of how much you might want somebody to be happy, it's not going to happen right away. So you have to develop equanimity around that. But again, that, too, has to be measureless, a quality you develop so that you can call on it whenever you need it.

You also want to make your goodwill as expansive as the earth. Just as when a man comes along and says he's going to try to get all the earth out of earth, and he spits here and there, he urinates here and there, and he digs here and there, but he's never going to come to the end of the great earth, for the great earth is too expansive. In the same way, you want your goodwill to be as expansive as the great earth, something that no amount of urinating or spitting can wash away.

The other way in which the brahma-viharas are like a large river has to do with the image of the lump of salt. The lump of salt stands for any past bad kamma you may have. If you can make your mind expansive through the development of limitless goodwill and the rest of the brahma-viharas, then if the results of any past measureable bad kamma come, they hardly even touch the mind, in the same way that a lump of salt thrown into the river wouldn't make the water in the river too salty to drink. You don't want your mind to be the water in a cup, narrow and confined. If all you have is just the water in the cup, then when you put a big lump of salt in it, you can't drink it at all.

But this image of expansiveness refers not only to the development of the brahma-viharas. The water in the river also corresponds to your ability to develop the mind so that it doesn't get overwhelmed by pain, doesn't get overwhelmed by pleasure. In other words, you want your mind to be larger than pain, larger than pleasure. One way of preventing it from being overwhelmed by pleasure is to practice with pleasure. You sometimes hear that strong states of concentration are best avoided because the pleasure is just so seductive that it's going to pull you off the path. But if you don't work with pleasure, how are you going to overcome it? If you just try to avoid it, then when it really hits, you won't have any tools to keep yourself from being overwhelmed by it.

So you consciously use the breath to induce pleasurable sensations wherever you can in the body. In the beginning, this will be just in certain areas of the body, certain channels of the body that you can get comfortable, so focus on those. As they become more and more pleasurable and more and more

connected, then further connections will develop, and then more connections and more, until you've got the whole body connected with a sense of ease. You'll come to recognize for yourself the tone that feels easeful throughout the body, and you can go right there. At first it may not be very intense, but if you stick with it, it'll have a chance to grow.

But even as it gets more and more intense, you don't want to focus on the ease as your main theme. You want to stay focused on the breath because your attention to the breath is what produces the ease. Let the ease do its work in the body but don't let yourself get overwhelmed by it or sucked into it. Be determined that you're not going to lose your focus, you're not going to lose your grasp on the breath. That's your practice in learning how not to be overcome by pleasure.

A similar principle works with the pain. As you work with the breath, you may encounter painful sensations in the body that even good breathing can't dissolve. But you learn how to not let yourself get fastened on the pain, or overwhelmed by the pain. Focus instead on the pleasurable parts of the body. If the whole body seems to be painful, go to the sense of space that surrounds the body, permeating through all the different atoms, and keep your focus there. If you can, consciously erase from the mind any perceptions that tell you there's a limitation to the body—i.e., that the skin is located here, the boundary between the body and the air outside is located there. Just don't pay attention to those particular sensations, or don't interpret those sensations in that way, and you'll find that you've got a large awareness you can back into. The pains will appear within the awareness, but they don't have to overcome it.

Those are some of the ways you make the mind expansive.

As for making it tall or high, the Buddha compares discernment to going up on a tower and looking down on the world below, seeing all the concerns of human beings as they scurry around. When you're looking at them from way up high, they all seem so small. If you can learn to look at your own everyday concerns in the same way, you've heightened the mind. This is one of the terms they use, *adhicittam,* which means that you raise the level of the mind. You've got a higher level of pleasure as your standing point: the pleasure of form. Then you look at the pleasure of sensuality and see that it's got lots and lots of drawbacks. You look at your everyday issues concerning this person or that project or whatever, and you see them in the context of the larger scheme of things. The vision the Buddha had of the whole cosmos on the night of his

awakening was a way of heightening the mind, and—from that heightened perspective—understanding the principle of action.

When you can see the principle of action as universal, and that whatever happens in your life is part of this larger play of kammic forces, it helps to depersonalize your everyday concerns. This depersonalization is an important aspect to developing discernment. For instance, suppose you're dealing with people who say nasty things. One of the things the Buddha has you tell yourself if you're hearing someone really lashing out at you, is, "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear." We don't usually think in those terms. We usually think, "Why is that person being so nasty to me?" And in doing that, we put ourselves right in the line of fire. Whereas if you can step back and think, "An unpleasant sound is making contact at the ear," you've raised the level of your mind. You can look at the nasty words going right beneath you or right past you. You realize that what that person is saying is his or her own kamma, not yours. It doesn't have to touch you.

The fact that people are saying those things doesn't violate your rights because, after all, they've got a mouth and they can say whatever they want to with it. But you learn how to take yourself out of the line of fire. You can actually feel sorry for those people if they're simply speaking out of greed, aversion, or delusion. If what they have to say is actually true, if you've actually done something wrong, then by lifting your mind to a higher plane, you're in a better position to admit your mistake and to learn from it.

So this ability to depersonalize things is what heightens the mind, raises the level of the mind, so you're up on the tower looking down at people on the ground below, or up on a mountain looking down at the people in the valley, seeing your life in a broader perspective.

As for deepening the mind, the Buddha usually uses "deepening" to refer to arahantship, the point where the mind is so deeply rooted that it's like a stone column sixteen spans tall, eight spans buried in the rock of a mountain. As for the eight spans above ground, no matter how strong the winds come from any of the eight directions—these are the winds of gain/loss, status/loss of status, praise/criticism, pleasure/pain—the stone column doesn't shiver or shake.

Sometimes the Buddha would use the image of depth as in the depth of the ocean. The fully awakened mind is unfathomable like the sea. It's so deep you can't measure it, so big you can't measure it. Even though this technically applies to arahantship, you can hold that perception in mind: that you have a

property of awareness larger than everything it knows, that goes deeper than everything it knows. It can encompass everything. Hold that image in mind. And that awareness keeps on knowing regardless of whether the body feels strong, weak, sick, whatever. Ajaan Maha Boowa even advises, at the moment you're about to die and there's pain in the body, that you try to get in touch with that sense of awareness and ask yourself: "Which is going to disappear first, the pain or the awareness?" The pain is going to go first. As long as you can keep that perception in mind, it gives you the strength to deal with a lot of things that otherwise you couldn't bear. You're less likely to be overwhelmed.

And as you hold this image of a larger, deeper awareness in mind, it's a lot easier to deal with distractions. Instead of thinking of your mind being here and then zipping over there, getting distracted, you realize the distraction is appearing within this field of your awareness. So it's just a matter of allowing the distraction to dissolve, while the awareness remains there, grounded—unaffected, untouched.

These are some of the reasons you work on expanding your conscious sense of the body so that you're sensitive to the whole body as you breathe in, sensitive to the whole body as you breathe out. You try to develop a sense of goodwill that's immeasurable, regardless of what people do. And even though there are times when you have to say No to people, or you have to say things that are displeasing to them, that doesn't mean that your goodwill has shrunk. Because after all, letting people get away with all kinds of nastiness is not being kind to them. You're coming from a larger awareness that's not going to be destroyed by anything, one that can take in the bigger picture and act for the larger good in the long term. That's the perception you want to hold in mind. Even though you haven't yet fully touched that awareness, or don't have a really secure hold on it, the simple fact that you can have that concept and revert to it when you need it helps get you over and around a lot of difficulties.

So practice thinking about your awareness in these terms: broad, tall, deep, what the Buddha calls expanded awareness, the expanded mind, *mahaggatam cittam,* the heightened mind, *adhicittam.* These are some of the key concepts in the practice, the key concepts in the skills you need to get the mind past suffering.

Your Gyroscope

January 16, 2010

Bring your awareness to the breath. Think about the breath and then notice where you feel the breath—not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, through the nose, but any place in the body where there's a sensation that corresponds to the breathing: the rise and fall of the abdomen, the rise and fall of the chest, the more subtle feelings you may feel in your neck, your head, your shoulders, your back, your arms and legs. Any place where you clearly notice a sense of energy, be aware of that.

And try to establish a sense of balance: What kind of breathing feels right? What kind of breathing is too long? What kind of breathing is too short? What kind of breathing is just right—just long enough, just short enough? The same with deep and shallow, heavy and light, broad and narrow. Experiment to see what brings the breath into balance—and brings the mind into balance with the breath, so that you're not clamping down on it too hard and, at the same time, not holding it too loosely.

The classic image is of a person holding a baby bird in his hand. If you hold it a little too tight, the bird is going to die. Too loose, and the bird will fly away. So try to bring things into a sense of "just right," a sense of balance, and see what you can do to maintain that balance. If things come up in the mind, what can you do not to get swept away by them? You stay right where you are. It's like being in a ship out in the ocean. The waves rise and the waves fall, but if your ship has a good gyroscope, the ship doesn't lose its balance.

This principle is important. The practice is not only a matter of what you do while you're sitting here, but also as you take your practice out in the outside world. Because the world has its waves. There's material gain and there's material loss; status, loss of status; praise and criticism; pleasure and pain. These things rise and fall, rise and fall, like waves. And some of them are rogue waves. They come with a huge rise in the water. Sometimes they're more gentle. But sometimes even gentle waves can knock you over and drown you if you're not careful.

So you want to have a sense of a gyroscope inside, something that helps keep you on an even keel. Part of this is just the physical sense of having a good center inside, a center you maintain wherever you go. It might be in the

middle of your chest, it might be in your head—any place where you can maintain a sense that the body is here, and your awareness is here, and the awareness isn't too tight. The blood is flowing easily; you're not tensing up around your center. As for whatever sense of ease there is in your center, think of it spreading out from there. Then just try to maintain that sense of center. That's one kind of gyroscope you can carry into your dealings with other people, wherever your encounters are. Try to maintain that physical sense of center as steadily as you can, so you don't get knocked over by the waves of what the other person might be saying, or how you're reacting to that person. Whatever comes up, you try to maintain this balance inside.

It's important to maintain this, both for your sake and for the other person's sake. There's another classic image in the Canon of two acrobats on the top end of a bamboo pole set vertically into the ground. The question is: Should they look after each other or should each look after him or herself? And the answer is that you each look after yourself, maintaining your balance. You can't maintain the other person's balance, but the more steadily you maintain your balance, the easier it is for other people to maintain their balance around you.

So think of this physical sense of center—where the breath energy is good and you constantly tend to it—as your gyroscope.

But you need more than just that. You also need to understand about the ways of the world, and the importance of maintaining your state of mind as something solid in the midst of the world. Otherwise, even though you may have some skill in maintaining your physical sense of inner balance, old ideas and old values can come welling up. If you have nothing to fend them off, your gyroscope will get knocked off kilter and you'll get washed away.

This is why reflecting on the eight ways of the world is a helpful practice. What does the world have to offer? Just those eight things: material gain, material loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain. That's it. And what is there of any lasting value in any of these things? The only value is if you find a way to do good, say, with your gain or your status, and to learn lessons from your loss. Keep reminding yourself: This is the way the world is. Things come. Things go. When they come and go, remind yourself that they really weren't yours to begin with anyhow. When you go around flaunting your gains, you're like a man going around with borrowed goods, getting his pleasure and sense of self-esteem out of things that belong to other people. But

the owners have the right to take their things back at any time.

That's the way the world is. Look at your money: It doesn't have your name on it. Even on your credit card, the name of the bank is bigger than your name. It's more important than your name. And the bank can call their credit card back if they want. It's not really yours.

So if you're looking for pleasure and satisfaction outside, you're looking in the wrong place, because none of these things really belong to you. Even your own body doesn't really belong to you. You can use it for the time being but then you have to send it back. In the mean time, while you have it, you want to make the best use of it, so that you can get something of permanent value or lasting value out of it to take with you when you go.

So it's not the pleasure of having these things, it's the goodness you do with them: That's what really matters. When you learn to be generous with material things, that becomes a quality of generosity in the mind. When you use your status to help other people, that becomes a quality of compassion. The qualities you develop are the only things that really stay with you, even past death.

When you meet with praise and criticism, you can develop the wisdom of looking at what other people say, looking at their intentions, and looking at yourself. After all, sometimes criticism is very useful. As the Buddha once said, if someone points out your faults, you should regard that person as having pointed out a treasure. In other words, if the faults really are genuine faults, you've learned something—because our faults are very hard for us to see. We tend to hide them in places where we know we're not going to look. Only if you see your faults clearly can you work with them and develop good qualities in their place. That's a genuine treasure. And when people praise you, remember it's their way of encouraging you, not just to stay where you are but to get better, to keep on being good.

As for pleasure and pain, there are many different kinds of pleasure. You want to learn how to find pleasure that's not intoxicating, that doesn't blur your mind's vision when you look for the real source of pleasure inside. As for pain, the Buddha said this is an excellent way of learning the noble truths. The first noble truth is stress: the stress that comes from craving, the stress that comes from clinging. When you find the mind suffering from pain, you ask yourself, "Where is the cause of that suffering?" It's not so much in the physical pain. It's in the clinging and craving within the mind. That's where

you want to look.

When you adjust your understanding in this way, then when these waves of the world go up and down, you can learn from both the ups and from the downs. That's when you're safe. And your gyroscope won't get easily knocked off kilter. You'll be able to maintain your balance.

So your protection is both the concentration and the discernment working together. This helps you to maintain your sense of balance, so that things that used to knock you over don't knock you over anymore. The waves come past, and they just go past. You stay upright as things go up and as things go down. That's the skill you want to take with you. You can't take the monastery with you. You can't fold it in a little package and take it home, spread it out and surround yourself with it. But you can take the skills you've been developing here. Try to maintain that center as you get up from where you're sitting in meditation, as you walk around, when you go to sleep. Try to stay with that sense of the center until you drift off. When you wake up, that should be your first question: Where is my center? Establish that before anything else, and then think about what you have to do next.

The wisdom lies in giving priority to your gyroscope inside, so that none of the waves of the world can knock you off course.

Better to Give than to Consume

August 17, 2011

In the Novice's Questions, the most interesting question is the very first: What is one? And the answer is: All beings subsist on food. This is what defines us as beings: the fact that we need food to maintain our existence. And for most of us that's pretty much all our lives. What we consume is the big issue.

Years back, there was a TV series, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,* and they didn't show any rich and famous people making their own things or showing off things that they had produced themselves. It was all about what they had bought, what they were consuming. Our culture is obsessed with consuming. One of my favorite *New Yorker*cartoons shows a couple sitting in a living room, talking to some friends, and the husband is saying, "Of course, it's had its ups and downs, but by and large Margaret and I have found the consumer experience to be a rewarding one."

That's the attitude many of us bring when we come to the Dhamma. We're used to consuming not only things but also experiences. There's a huge industry —the experience industry—where they'll create experiences for you to buy. Remember back a while when they advertized the Ford experience? They weren't selling you Fords; they were selling you the experience of having a Ford. Park rangers talked about maintaining the Yosemite experience or the Zion experience for people to come and consume. So it's understandable that when people come to the meditation, they think of the meditation experience as something they can consume as well. We want the bliss; we want the pleasure, the sense of freedom that we've heard that will come from mindfulness and concentration. But in order to consume those things, we first have to produce them.

This is why, when the Buddha starts his teachings on the most basic levels, he starts with generosity. It's the first of the perfections, the first of his teachings in the gradual discourse, when he's leading people step-by-step up to the four noble truths. He starts with generosity and then moves on to virtue, the rewards of virtue in heaven, then the drawbacks of those rewards, and then finally the value of renunciation. Once the mind can see that renunciation would be a good thing, then it's ready for the four noble truths.

In many ways, renunciation is a continuation of the principle of generosity. You learn that you have to give something away or give it up in order to get something of greater value in return. So instead of encouraging us to come to the meditation as consumers, the Buddha encourages us to come as givers. What are you going to give to the practice?

Some of the famous Ajaans in Thailand talk about how the practice is one thing clear through. In other words, it starts with one principle and just works out the implications of that principle all the way through to the end. And the one thing is this principle of giving. This is what raises us up beyond and above the level of just being beings that have to consume and feed. Remember, the arahant is someone who is no longer defined by any desire and so is no longer defined as a being. Because arahants have fully comprehended food, their path can't be traced. Even their consuming of food is a gift. Those who give to the arahant get rewarded many times over. That's why the arahant is the only person who can eat the alms of the countryside and not incur a debt.

So the practice is one of giving from the very beginning. All too often we encounter talks about dana as thinly disguised requests for money, which is why some people have a real aversion to the topic. But the Buddha had an etiquette around this. There's a story in the Canon of some monks who were building huts. They started getting into a contest with one another as to who could build the nicest hut. They were constantly asking for materials and workmen, and the householders were getting harassed with all the begging and requests. When they'd see a monk, they'd turn away, run away, close the door. As the story says, sometimes in the evening they might see a cow coming in the distance and, assuming that it was a monk, they'd run away. Things got that bad.

So the Buddha called the monks together and gave them a series of stories about how people don't like to be begged from. One story told of two hermits, an older brother and a younger brother, living near a river. A naga, a very beautiful naga, would come up out of the river every day and just show itself to the younger brother. This frightened the younger brother, as he had no idea what the naga's intentions were, and who knows what the naga might try to do to him. So he went to the older brother and asked him, "What can I do to keep this naga from coming?" So the older brother said, "Does the naga have anything of value?" The younger brother said, "Yes, he's got a beautiful jewel on his chest." So the older brother said, "Well, the next time you see the naga,

ask for the jewel."

So the next day the naga came and as the naga was in front of the younger hermit, the hermit asked for the jewel. So the naga went away. The following day, as the naga was halfway up from the river to the hermit's cave, the hermit asked for the jewel. So the naga went away. And the third day, as soon as the naga came out of the river, the younger hermit asked for the jewel, and the naga said, "Okay, enough. I'm not coming back. You're asking for too much." And then of course, after the naga stopped coming back, the younger brother missed him. It was kind of cool seeing a naga in your meditation like that. But by that time he'd driven him away.

So when generosity is presented as part of a begging talk—that's what those "dana talks" are; they're begging talks—it's not really welcome. As a result, we miss the meaning of generosity, and we miss a lot of the other aspects of the practice, too, because the practice has to start with generosity. Generosity is not just a matter of giving things. You learn how to give of your time, to give of your energy, to give of your knowledge, and in doing so you're changing your whole relationship to the world around you. You're not just a being who's eating and eating and consuming things and experiences. You're finding that you've got things inside that you can share, things you can give, and there's a sense of wealth that comes with that. If all you're thinking about is consuming—"What can I get out of this? What can I get out of that?"—you're poor. No matter how much you have, you're poor—because there's always a big lack. But if you come to every situation with the question, "What can I give?" you're coming from a position of wealth. And you find that you do have reserves of energy and knowledge that you can share, and in sharing you gain a lot in return, a lot with more value.

Both generosity and renunciation are forms of trade. There's a passage where a monk says, "I will trade what dies for the deathless. I'll trade what is limited for unbinding." You're trading up. You can't get the better thing without giving up the lesser thing. When you understand that, you realize that whatever you're doing in the practice, you want to come with the attitude of What Can I Give. If you don't have material things to give, how about your time? How about your energy, your knowledge, your skills? When you're dealing with other people, the question is not so much, "How much are they entertaining me?" or "What can I get out of them?" It's: "What can I give? What can I give to the situation?" There are times, for instance, when there's a

lot of tension in the room. Can you give some peace? Can you give some humor? Something to make it better.

Virtue is also a gift. As the Buddha said, when you make up your mind not to harm anyone under any circumstances—no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants—you're giving limitless protection to all beings. In other words, at the very least, from your quarter, they have nothing to fear. As you give them limitless protection, you gain a share in that limitless protection as well. So virtue, too, is a gift.

Meditation is a gift. You have to give your energy, you have to give your attention, to develop your mindfulness. When you're focused on the breath, it's good not to hold anything back. Just think of yourself plunging into the breath and the body, totally. The reward is that you develop an all-around experience of ease and refreshment. If part of you is pulled back, there's a part of you that's not sharing in this, that's not gaining anything of real value.

So try to come to the practice with the attitude that it's all about giving. Ultimately, you'll be giving up your greed, aversion, and delusion, giving up even your sense of self or your many senses of self. First you give up your unskillful selves as you develop the skillful ones, but then after you've worked so hard on developing the skillful ones, the Buddha said you've got to give those up, too, for the sake of your long-term welfare and happiness. There's a reward that comes from not hanging on.

You're always trading up—but you can't trade up unless you start giving to begin with. Otherwise, if you're just in consuming mode, you're living off your old goodness.

One of the Buddha's foremost disciples was a woman Visakha, whose nickname was Migara's mother. It wasn't because she had a son named Migara. Her father was named Migara. The reason she was called his mother was because she saw that he was just living off his old merit. He was just in consuming mode all the time, and she made him realize this. She'd learned the Dhamma from the Buddha and so she taught him, "You're just living off all your old merit and if you don't create any new goodness, you're going to run out." That was the teaching that convinced him to change his ways. Because she was his teacher, she was called his mother. She had given him the gift of Dhamma.

So remember, we're here to go beyond ourselves, to go beyond just being beings that are consuming all the time. We try to redefine ourselves, not by

what we eat or what we own or what we consume, but by what we produce, what we can give. Making this switch in the mind changes everything. Difficult patches come up in the meditation and you ask yourself not, “Why is this so bad? Does this mean I’m a miserable meditator?” You say, “No, what can I give to this situation so that it doesn’t snowball? What resources do I still have? What can I draw on to give to the situation to turn it into a different kind of situation?” When things are going well, again, what do you give to make sure that they continue to go well? You don’t just sit there slurping up the pleasure and the rapture. You look after them. You give your energy to protect them—so that as you get more and more into the giving mood, when you finally do have your taste of the deathless, instead of trying to grab onto it or hold onto it, which places a separation between you and the experience, you give up any clinging you might have around it. That’s how you reach the deathless.

So in giving up you’re not being left adrift. You’re giving up things of lesser value for things of greater value. But remember the only way you can trade up is to be willing to give something in the first place. Otherwise there’s no exchange.

Forgiveness

November 2, 2010

Right view comes in many levels. There's mundane right view, which deals mainly with action and the results of action, the principle of rebirth, and the conviction that there are people who know these things from direct knowledge; it's not just a theory. Then there's transcendent right view, which deals more with events in the mind: suffering, its cause, the end of suffering, and the path to its end. Many of us make the mistake of wanting to go straight to the transcendent level. Who wants to muck around in the mundane? Especially when you hear the theory about two levels of truth, that there's just conventional truth and then there's the Real Thing, so who wants to get stuck on conventions?

But the Buddha never taught that way. He would lead people into transcendent right view by starting with mundane right view. It provides the context for understanding every stage of the practice, because the more refined parts of the practice have to build on the basics. If you can't get the basics right, things are going to get skewed by the time you get to the end.

Like the issue of forgiveness: Forgiveness seems to be such a basic human activity that we forget that our ideas about forgiveness are picked up from our culture and our view of what's going on in the world. If you want forgiveness to be a helpful part of the practice, you have to look at how your ideas of forgiveness are tied up with your views about the world.

Many of us in the West have a feeling that we've picked up from the culture, that there's a plan for everything: The universe had a beginning point, it's going to have an end point, there's a story, and it's going to come to closure. Now there are different ideas about what exactly that story is and where it's headed, but just the idea that there is a beginning point and there is an end point, that there's a purpose to the universe at large: That right there has a big impact on how we think about forgiveness. If there's a beginning point, you can tally up who did what first: how many times you've been wronged, how many times you've wronged the other person, who owes a debt of forgiveness to whom. If the plan for all of this is that we're going to become one loving community, we need to get back on good terms with everybody else. Especially if we're going to be divided into two communities for eternity

—those who are on loving terms and those who are not on loving terms—everyone would want to be on the loving-terms side. This is why we believe that forgiveness has to involve learning how to love the person you forgave.

Then there's another view about the plan for all of this, which is that each person has his or her own independent inspiration from within and that we're not in any position to judge anybody else. In a universe like that, forgiveness is inappropriate. How can we judge someone else's behavior? Who are you to decide that you're in a position to forgive somebody else when you can't judge anyone's behavior at all?

We see this not only in modern Western culture but also in the Mahayana. Several years back, a scholar who was working on an early Mahayana text got in touch with me and wanted to know where the principle of not judging others appeared in the Pali Canon, because apparently it's all over the Mahayana: the idea that each bodhisattva has his or her own independent inspiration or path to follow, so no one can judge anyone else's behavior or teachings. I looked around in the Canon and I couldn't find it. There is actually a lot about judging people in the Pali Canon—what principles you should use, what principles you shouldn't use—but the idea that you're in no position to judge anybody else does not appear in the Buddha's teachings at all.

In other words, you *can* judge when you've been wronged. Now, you may have some misperceptions about the other person's intentions or about the actual long-term impact of that person's actions, but there are times when you know you've been wronged. So what are you going to do about it?

You look at it in terms of the Buddha's mundane right view. He says that this process of wandering on comes from an inconceivable beginning and there's no way to make sense of it. He never comes down for sure on whether there was a beginning point or not, but either way you simply can't conceive it. It's too far back; it's too bizarre. As for the endpoint, again, he doesn't make any statements about whether there's going to be an endpoint to all this. But his picture of how the universe goes through its cycles is pretty random. You get a lot of people improvising. There's no big plan. There's no one narrative about all this, which means that if you stop to ask yourself that question—who was the first person to do wrong, you or the other person—you don't really know.

There's a story of Somdet Toh, who was a famous monk in 19th century Thailand. He was abbot of a monastery right across the river from the Grand Palace. One evening, a young monk came in to complain about how another

monk had hit him. Somdet Toh's response was, "Well, you hit him before he hit you." And the young monk said, "No, he came up and just hit me out of nowhere. I didn't do anything to him." And Somdet Toh kept saying, "No, you hit him before." The young monk got really frustrated and went to complain to a monk higher up in the hierarchy, and Somdet Toh had to explain himself. He said, "Well, it must have been in some previous lifetime. The complaining monk hit the other monk first." Of course, that might not have been the first time. It could have been just the latest installment of a long back and forth.

So there's an inconceivable beginning and no real closure. Different people decide that they've had enough of the wandering-on and they figure out how to stop, but that doesn't keep the other beings in the universe from continuing to wander on and on. There's no real plan. As one of the chants we recite in the evening says, "There's no one in charge." There's no overall narrative.

What there is, though, is the question: What kind of kamma do you want to create? If the answer is "skillful kamma," then one of the things you've got to learn how to do is not to get focused on how you've been wronged by other people. You don't want to go around getting revenge because that just keeps the bad kammic cycle going on and on and on.

This is what forgiveness means in the context of mundane right view: You decide that you're not going to hold any danger to that person. You're not going to try to get back at the other person. You'll let the issue go. Whatever unskillfulness has been going on between the two of you, you want it to stop—and it has to stop with you.

And that's it. It doesn't mean you have to love the person or go and kiss and make up or anything, because there are some cases where the way you've been wronged is so heavy that it's really hard even to be around the other person, much less to interact. You're not called on to love the person and there's no forcing of the issue that you have to come to closure, that you have to continue weaving the relationship. You can just leave the frayed ends waving in the air, and you're done with them.

Now if you want, you can go for a reconciliation, but that requires the other person's cooperation as well. Both of you have to see that the relationship is worth continuing. But there's no sense that every wrong has to be reconciled, because there are lots of cases where reconciliation is impossible. One side just doesn't want it or won't admit to having done wrong.

You see this even in the Vinaya. The Buddha places a heavy emphasis on harmony within the Sangha but he never advises trying to achieve harmony at the expense of the Dhamma. If someone is advocating a position that's really against the Dhamma, and you can't get the person to change his or her mind, then that's it. The Sangha expels the person. Or if the conflict is between two groups of people, one of them will just leave. If you figure out that the other side's motivation is just too corrupt, then the Buddha says you can't achieve reconciliation in a case like that. You can't achieve harmony. To try to force harmony by pretending that there's no difference or that both sides are okay, is against the Vinaya; it's against the Dhamma.

So again, there's no master plan that everything's going to have to get resolved in the end. It's up to you to decide exactly where you want to take the relationship. Now, it's for your own good to give forgiveness, and forgiveness is something you can give from your side alone, regardless of whether the other person accepts your forgiveness or even thinks that he or she did something wrong that merits forgiving. But for the sake of your own training of the mind, for the sake of gaining freedom, you have to forgive. You don't want to pose a danger to anybody, yourself or the other person. You don't want to get back, for it will force you to keep coming back.

As for being forgiven, you have to accept there are times when people will not forgive you for something you've done—but that doesn't mean that what you did was so awful that nobody could ever forgive you. Again, it's the other person's individual choice. As the Buddha once said, there are two kinds of fools: one, the fool who never admits having done wrong; and two, the fool who, when presented with a righteous and sincere apology, refuses to accept it. Now, a sincere apology means not only that you really are sorry, but that you're also sincere about trying not to do that again in the future, whatever it was. Some people are wise and they'll accept that kind of apology. Other people are foolish. You can't make your happiness depend on trying to get them to forgive you, to overcome their foolishness.

So keep that phrase in the back of your mind: "There's no one in charge." There's no overall narrative that says everything has to be tied up into nice neat packages. Not every story has to come to closure. Think of yourself more as an author just tossing out story ideas. If the story gets to the point where it's no longer good, it's not going to go anywhere, so you just throw the story away and start a new story.

This is one of the advantages of mundane right view: It allows you to start new stories all the time, stories in which you learn how to develop skillful qualities. However bad your upbringing or however bad you've been behaving in the past or however poorly you've been treated in the past, you overcame the difficulties; you took charge of your life. You realized that whatever happiness was going to be true and lasting was going to have to come from training the mind, giving up any desire to settle old scores, or to go around loving everybody or being loved by everybody. You give those attitudes up.

Now you do develop goodwill. Goodwill is not lovingkindness. Goodwill is the desire that all beings be happy. In some cases that happiness can be found by continuing a relationship; in other cases you have to say, "Well, that's it as far as this relationship goes, but may you be happy wherever you go." Like the chant the Buddha gave for wishing goodwill for snakes and scorpions and rats and creeping things: May all beings be happy, whether they have no legs or two legs or four legs or many legs, may they meet with good fortune and may they now go away.

There are some cases where a continued relationship is not going to be a good thing for either side. Like the story of Ajaan Fuang with the snake in his room: The snake moved in—I don't know whether it was during the day or the night—and Ajaan Fuang realized he had a snake in the room but he decided to take it as a test. So he continued living with the snake in his room for three days to see how much fear might come up in his mind and whether he really could spread goodwill to snakes. And he was spreading goodwill to the snake all the time. Finally, on the third night, he sat and meditated, and in his mind he addressed a message to the snake, which was basically, "We come from different branches of the animal kingdom, like people from different societies. Our language is different, our attitudes, our backgrounds are different. It's very easy to misunderstand each other. I might do something that you would take offense at. It'd be much better if you went someplace else. There are many nice places out there in the forest." And the snake left.

Remember that one of those passages in the phrase for goodwill is, "May all living beings look after themselves with ease." It's not that you're going to go around to look after everybody else and clean up after them and take care of them and try to please them and always have a close intimate relationship with them. There are some beings, some people, where it's really hard and it's too much to ask. You want to focus instead on your own mind, making sure that you

have no ill will for anybody and that, at the very least, you’re harmless in your behavior.

When you understand forgiveness in this way, then the practice of forgiveness is a lot easier. And it’s a lot more conducive to becoming free.

Stubborn Clinging

July 26, 2011

The term "becoming" refers to the mind's habit of taking on an identity in a world of experience. This can refer to our sense of the world outside and our identity within that world, whether it's the social world or the physical world. But "world" can also refer to worlds in the mind. As you meditate, you're actually taking on a state of becoming. The world here is the world of form: your sense of the body from within. For the time being, your identity is that you're the person staying with this sense of form: looking after the breath, making sure your attention stays with the breath, making sure your thoughts stay with the breath, trying to be sensitive to how your thinking has an effect on the breath. You're monitoring this at the same time as you're doing it, creating the sense of concentration inside.

Ajaan Lee was once teaching an old scholarly monk in Bangkok how to meditate. At one point the older monk complained. He said, "Wait a minute, we're supposed to be doing away with states of becoming but when we're meditating it seems like we're creating one." And Ajaan Lee said, "That's precisely what we're doing: We're creating a state of becoming." He went on to say, "It's like having a chicken that gives eggs. You don't just destroy all the eggs. You learn how to eat some of them." He didn't complete the image, but if you want to learn about eggs, you need to eat in order to have the strength to learn. So you have to eat some of the eggs you're studying. But that doesn't deprive you of eggs to study, because in eating the eggs, you have to cook them first, and in cooking them you learn a lot about eggs.

So as you're meditating on the breath, you've got good eggs to eat. The mind has lots of other ways of eating that you don't want to get involved with right now. Every state of becoming has to depend on clinging, and the Buddha's word for clinging—*upadana*—is the same word for taking sustenance or feeding on things. So every state of becoming has to be based either on feeding on views, feeding on habits and practices, or feeding on your sense of yourself. Some states of becoming feed on sensual desires: your fascination with thinking about sensual plans, those worlds you create in your mind around the sensual pleasure you want to get from food or people or whatever. That kind of food can be bad for you.

So as we develop a state of concentration here in the mind, we're training the mind to feed in a better way. You notice as you go through life that the more skills you have, the wider the range of different senses of self you can develop around those skills. You have an enlarged sense of what you can manipulate, what you control, and if one set of skills doesn't help in a situation, you can try another. Mastering concentration gives you a new range in which to move and exert control, which is really liberating because so often we get tied up in our unskillful, unhealthy worlds: states of becoming where we're clinging to unhealthy views of who we are or what the world should be like or how things should be done. We can get really tied up in who's right and who's wrong. Some people are so thoroughly enmeshed in their worlds that you wonder if they're ever going to get out. They totally resist any effort to push them out or to lure them out or to persuade them that where they are is not in their best interest.

You've also got characters like that in your own head: certain identities you take on in certain situations, especially when you feel you've been wronged. The part of you that feels wronged wants to have justice served. You don't like to hear the idea that maybe you're the one who caused the problem. Or even if the other person really is wrong, the fact that you're suffering here can't totally be blamed on the other person. Sometimes you try to talk to that mind state about letting go and not carrying on with that particular fight, and it will really resist. That sense of having been wronged is probably one of our strongest manifestations of our sense of self. Even though you're banging your head against the wall, if someone then tells you, "You know, you really don't need to bang your head against the wall," there's a strong part that resists. It defines itself by the pain it's creating, and if it stops, it's afraid it'll be annihilated.

This is when you have to gather the different members of your committee around, to show that there are alternative ways of living in this world, ways that don't involve so much frustration and pain. That's one of the reasons why we develop the skill of bringing this new member to the committee: the member that's good at getting the mind into concentration and keeping it there with a sense of wellbeing, a sense of fullness and rapture, refreshment, a very gratifying sense of serenity. This gives you an alternative place to stay. It gives you a new identity to take on as you try to deal with the more stubborn and heedless members that have been bullying the rest of the committee for so long.

Now this doesn't mean that once the mind gets a good state of concentration like this, it's going to automatically slip out of its unhealthy states. That's where discernment has to come in. This is why the Buddha taught the four noble truths, why he began the path with the four noble truths: pointing out first that our clinging is suffering. This is the essence of all the mind's sufferings: its ways of clinging to the five aggregates. The recognition of this suffering—the stress, the pain you're causing yourself—and the recognition that it's not necessary: Those are the only things that are going to get you out of those really stubborn mind states.

That and respect for the teaching. There are times when these mind states are so stubborn that they won't listen to anybody. When that's the case, it helps if some place in the mind there's a seed of the attitude that maybe the Buddha really did know what he was talking about, and maybe settling scores in the world is not what life is about, and maybe feeding on the injustices that you've suffered is a really miserable way of feeding. Maybe there's something better. When you have respect for that attitude, respect for that possibility, that's when you have an out.

So one of the duties of discernment is to notice where your stubbornness is: the stubbornness that really likes to hold on to your sensual fantasies, your sexual fantasies, lust, whatever, for people, for things, food, or your very strong views about what's right and wrong, your strong views of the right way of doing things—"It has to be done this way, it can't be done any other way"—or your strong views of who you are and when you feel you've been wronged. You've got to learn how to ferret out that stubbornness and see how to get around it by noticing the suffering inherent in that kind of clinging. To have respect for the Buddha's teachings is a big help.

The Buddha recognized that this is an important part of teaching the Dhamma—i.e., of one person teaching another person the Dhamma and also of you teaching yourself the Dhamma. There has to be an element of respect along with the realization that no matter how right you may be, if there's suffering involved in that rightness, something's wrong. You also need to realize that when you're willing to step back from that sense of rightness, it's not like you're abandoning a fight or foregoing the justice you might feel you deserve. You're doing it because you're suffering and you don't have to.

You see people suffering really miserable events, and some of them are scarred for the rest of their lives. They just can't get over that particular

sorrow, that particular loss. And yet other people who've suffered the same sort of thing can realize that feeding on that loss is not helping anybody and so they're able to drop it. Which sort of person do you want to be?

If you want to be the second sort, you need to learn how to develop the skills to deal with all the places where the mind is stubborn, holding on to its opinions, holding on to its rightness. Realize that you're the one who's suffering and you're the one causing it. Other people may have created bad outside conditions for you, but you're the one stabbing yourself with them. They've put knives in your path, but you're the one picking them up to injure yourself, repeatedly. How much longer do you want to carry it on?

So when we talk about respect for the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, it's not just a matter of bowing down. Admittedly, we do a lot of bowing down around here. It's partly to inculcate the attitude that maybe there's somebody who knows more than we do. Respect for the Dhamma means realizing that you don't have to suffer and it's your choice. Do you want to continue feeding in ways that give rise to suffering? Or do you have respect for the alternative where you don't have to suffer? This requires swallowing some of your pride. But swallowing your pride is a better way of feeding than continuing to feed off your sense of having been wronged.

Actually, when you let go of your pride, you don't swallow it. You spit it out.

So this is what it always comes down to: learning to spit out all the unhealthy food you've been gobbling down. Do you still want to keep suffering in your rightness, or have you had enough? When you find parts of the mind that resist the Dhamma, what can you do to soften them up a bit? That's a lot of the practice right there. The concentration helps in softening these things up because you keep reminding yourself: "I do have this other skill. I have this place of wellbeing that doesn't have to depend on settling old scores out there in the world, doesn't have to depend on the world outside at all. And wouldn't I be better off adopting the perspective that comes from taking that as my main center, my main source of food?"

A Victory that Matters

April 16, 2011

"Better than victory over a thousand is victory over one person—yourself."

This is a verse in the *Dhammapada* that points to some very important questions: What exactly do you want to win in this lifetime? What do want to gain? What battles are worth fighting? The primary talent of a good warrior is knowing which battles are worth fighting, which ones are not, and knowing when it's time to accept defeat for the strategic purpose of coming out ahead somewhere else that matters a lot more. There are things we may want out of other people that they don't want to give, like respect, acknowledgment of our existence, or acknowledgment of our worth as a person. Then you have to ask yourself, "Is it really worth fighting for? What does the fighting accomplish? Is it going to gain any respect? And even if it does, how much is that respect worth?"

There are so many battles in the world that just lead to bad kamma even when you win, sometimes *especially* when you win. Look at the history of the world when nations that won battles ended up being transformed into the enemy, taking on the enemy's characteristics. Is this what you want? At the same time, when you win a battle, you gain the animosity of those who lost.

This is why the Buddha said that it's better to focus on the battles inside, battles over your own defilements, greed, aversion, and delusion. Those are the battles that can be won, and when you win, you don't create any bad kamma. As for whether the people outside will acknowledge your victory, that doesn't really matter. In fact, as Ajaan Lee once said, "Things that other people know about aren't safe. You know for yourself; nobody else has to know."

Look at the history of Buddhism. Where is the history of those who truly gained awakening? Although some people reportedly have gained awakening, either through their own report or through the belief of their followers, who really knows? It's something purely internal; that's where it matters most.

There's another thing that's purely internal as well. That's your experience of suffering. We each suffer; however, we can't feel another person's suffering. We can sometimes sense that they're suffering, although we can't actually feel their pain. We only can feel ours. It's *the* subjective experience.

The Buddha points out that the suffering that really weighs down on the mind is not the suffering that comes from other people. It's the suffering you cause yourself. So, if you can win that battle, you've won the one that really matters.

Look at the ways you're causing yourself to suffer. This, according to the Buddha, is the issue to which we should give primary importance, and yet for the most part we're ignorant of it—and that ignorance is a prime part of the problem. He defines ignorance not so much as ignorance of his teachings as a whole, but more ignorance of the four noble truths and the tasks appropriate to them: comprehending suffering, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path to its cessation. Just knowing those things doesn't end the problem. You have to actually look at things in terms of the noble truths and treat them in line with the tasks appropriate to those truths until you can master those tasks to the point of completion. That's when your ignorance is ended.

How are you going to comprehend suffering? How are you going to let go of its cause and realize its cessation? By developing the path. What in the mind fights that by saying that other things you'd rather do are more important? The part of the mind that tosses up all kinds of obstacles. You could go along with the obstacles and block your path, or you can take the Buddha's approach by looking at how suffering feels from the inside and how all the processes that lead to suffering feel from the inside.

One of the processes you have to watch from the inside is the process of rebirth.

An issue that comes up often with people who object to the idea of rebirth is that they want a clear explanation from the Buddha on the mechanics of rebirth, on what it would look like to an outside observer. How could it work, especially given our modern scientific view on how things work? It doesn't make any sense, they say. So they cling to a materialistic view, as if holding everything to the test of a materialistic view would prove or disprove it. But has the materialistic view made us happy? It's provided us with some conveniences. It's solved any number of material problems. But it has never made people happy deep down inside. It certainly hasn't made them better people than they were before. The human race is just as savage as it was before the scientific revolution.

That should indicate that the materialistic view doesn't have the final word on things. It's like the MBA approach to business, where only profit matters. When everything else has to be sacrificed for profit, see what happens.

Everything does get sacrificed. Societies break down. The social fabric gets torn apart. This is what happens when a narrow view becomes ascendant and demands to be ascendant in every area.

It's not just now that people are challenging the Buddha about the metaphysics of rebirth. Back in his time it was a controversial issue, too.

One of the major fallacies that you hear repeatedly is that the Buddha just picked up the idea of rebirth from his culture because that's what everybody believed, and nobody thought to question it. People were questioning it. "Is the life force the same thing as the body or is it something else, separate from the body, something different from the body?" That question was a hot issue at the time, and it was directly related to the question of rebirth. If the life force was something different from the body, then you had a metaphysical explanation for how rebirth could happen. If it was the same thing as the body, then rebirth would be impossible. But the Buddha refused to take a position on the question. It's one of those ten questions he set aside. The battle of metaphysics is not worth winning. You say, "What is it that takes rebirth, where is it, can you see it?" But the question takes you nowhere.

The Buddha entirely avoided the question of whether there was or was not a "what" behind the process, but he did explain *how* the process happens, and how it's experienced from the inside. You wouldn't be responsible for the "what" anyhow, but you *are* responsible for the "how." It's part of the suffering—birth, aging, illness, and death—that comes from your craving. Because birth comes under the category of suffering, it's something you have to comprehend. You don't comprehend it in terms of somebody's theory about how the world works, but in terms of how you direct and experience the processes of the mind. This is where the battle is really important, because it's through craving that rebirth happens.

Think of the four Dhamma summaries: the world is insufficient; there's no one in charge; it has nothing of its own; it's a slave to craving. Even though it's filled with things that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self—aging, illness, and death—craving keeps us coming back for all that unsatisfactory stuff. If you can't win out over that craving, you really haven't won anything worthwhile. The whole point of the four noble truths is that you're responsible for this craving and you can put an end to it. And it's nothing far away. It's something you directly experience right here and now.

This is why the Buddha's approach is what you might call phenomenology:

how phenomena are directly experienced, without any reference to what there is behind that experience—and without trying to impose your ideas of what's behind experience on somebody else or letting them impose theirs on you. You're meditating to look at exactly what your mind is doing right now to create the phenomenon of suffering. When you can see craving and ignorance in action, you've got the focal point for the really important battle—the battle that, when you win it, you've won something really worthwhile.

The big issue in life is that we don't want suffering, but we keep creating it. Ajaan Suwat would often say, "It's through our own stupidity." He often translated ignorance as "stupidity." It's happening right before our very eyes, right here in the mind. It's not some mysterious process off someplace else. It's causing suffering right before our eyes. The suffering is not off someplace else either. *We're* the ones who keep looking off someplace else while ignoring what's right here now.

The meditation gives us tools to overcome that ignorance and craving. That's what we're basically getting victory over. We do this by seeing through these things and understanding why we're doing them. We think we can get some pleasure out of them, but we have to look very carefully at that pleasure, to see why we're so attached to it. Here again, the problem isn't metaphysical. Our attachment doesn't come because we have some metaphysical belief about whether things have an essence or don't have an essence. That's pretty irrelevant. We cling to actions that we keep doing over and over because we're addicted to them, and we're addicted to them because we believe that the pleasure they give outweighs the pain they cause. We see it that way because we're not looking carefully. We're ignorant of our own actions.

To overcome that ignorance, you need a good point of comparison against which you can measure that pleasure and pain. This is why you're practicing concentration. You try to develop a state of good solid concentration in the mind with a sense of ease and wellbeing that can come simply from being with the breath, being absorbed in the breath, filling the breath energy throughout the body with a sense of healthy energy. This puts you in a good position to compare things. You can look at the other pleasures you followed in life and ask, "Are they anything like this breath? Are they as steady, reliable, and harmless as this kind of pleasure?" You're training yourself to be a connoisseur of pleasure, so that you can really understand where the pleasure lies, where the pain lies, and how things stack up. Which pleasure is greater?

How about the pain of going back to your old ways of looking for pleasure? You see these things a lot more easily when you're coming from a vantage point of stable wellbeing.

Even though concentration isn't the ultimate, it does give you a higher standard for understanding what true pleasure can be. It doesn't automatically wean you off of your old ways of thinking, but it gives you a basis for actually doing the work of contemplation, especially when you realize that following your daily pleasures gets in the way of this pleasure of concentration. You've got to make a choice. Once you admit that you've got to make the choice, then it's easier to sort through your other pleasures and start seeing which habits you're willing to sacrifice. When you can drop them, you've won a victory over the clinging, craving, and ignorance that kept you bound to those habits.

This is where the victory really matters. As for what the people in the outside world might think: Why do you want to gain victory over their hearts or their opinions? What does it accomplish? Especially if they're resistant. You just develop bad habits of pride and the desire to control others. You lose out to your own defilements, the kind of defeat that can really be harmful.

Learn to see that defeat as a warning that you're focusing on the wrong battles. Then use that realization to set your heart on gaining a victory over your greed, aversion, and delusion; your craving, ignorance, and clinging—so that this very personal suffering that you're causing yourself can finally stop. Nobody else needs to praise you for this. Nobody else needs to know. When you reach this deathless element inside, it is its own reward, worth much more than the opinions of other people. Give it a chance. See if what the Buddha said was really right, that this is where true happiness lies, and that there's no other happiness that can compare. As he said, the flavor of the Dhamma beats all other flavors.

So see if you can come to taste that flavor and decide whether he's right.

Gratitude & Trust

October 12, 2010

Tonight marks the twentieth anniversary of the founding of Wat Metta. It was on October 12, 1990, that the land was first purchased. And it's good to reflect on how much we owe to the people who first thought up the idea of having this monastery and to the people whose gift of land and whose development of the land into a monastery have provided us with an opportunity to practice.

Here there are two themes worthy of reflection. First is the Buddha's saying, *Vissasa parama ñati:* Our foremost relatives are those for whom we feel trust. It was Ajaan Suwat who first thought up the idea of having this monastery. The donor of the land, the people who gave money and time and energy to get the monastery off the ground: They weren't related to us at all and yet they had a sense of trust in future generations that this would be a good thing to do, a good gift to give, and there would be people who would take good advantage of it. As the Buddha said, that relation through trust is much closer than our blood relations. If you're like me, you have some blood relatives for whom you feel no trust at all. The sense of relatedness there is pretty weak. But the people for whom you feel trust: That's a relatedness that's very strong—the kind of relatedness that keeps the world going and gives us a sense that human society is a worthwhile thing.

Which relates to another topic: gratitude. There's a saying that there are two people who are hard to find in the world. First is the person who's an *upakari:* someone who helps you before receiving any help from you. Second is the person who's received that kind of help and feels gratitude in response. Both of these people should be cherished.

There's a lot of misunderstanding around the topic of gratitude. We tend to confuse it with appreciation and contentment. Appreciation is what you feel for things or incidents from which you benefit, but no one else's good intentions are involved. An example of appreciation would be the story the Buddha tells of the man who has to cross over a river and realizes he's going to need a raft, so he makes the raft and then swims across in dependence on the raft. When he gets to the other side, he says, "How helpful this raft has been to me!" That's a sense of appreciation: Without the raft, he wouldn't have gotten where he was.

But the fact that he appreciates the raft doesn't mean that he has to carry it around with him from then on. He pulls it up on land or he sinks it down in the water near the shore and then goes on his way.

In other words, with appreciation you realize that you have benefited from something—and it can be a thing—and yet the need to respond is pretty minimal. In the case of something you can continue to use, you take care of it. And then there are cases of really negative events that helped to turn you around. Someone may have done something that was really nasty, but you grew into a stronger person because of it. You want to have an appreciation for the fact that sometimes you do benefit from misfortune, but that doesn't carry the lesson that you should heap misfortune on other people for the sake of what you can rationalize as their benefit. With gratitude, though, you've benefited from someone's good action, and that does carry the lesson that good actions are needed for human society to continue.

As for contentment, that simply means being happy with what you've got, realizing that you have good things and it's enough for the sake of the practice. The good things don't have to be all that good but they can be good enough so that you don't have to keep scrambling for more. That's contentment.

As for gratitude, that's more related to the teaching on kamma. When the Buddha introduced the topic of gratitude, he did so in the context of explaining kamma. After saying that there are good and bad actions that lead to good and bad results, he went on to say, "There is mother and father," which sounds like a non sequitur and something perfectly obvious except for the fact that in those days there were people who said there is no such thing as mother or father, meaning that your parents just gave birth to you because they were compelled by forces larger than themselves. Whoever created the universe decreed that they were going to give birth to you, so it involved no goodness on their part. The fact that they looked after you was also decreed by some outside force so again, there was no goodness on their part. What this statement means—"There is no mother or father"—is that you don't owe them anything.

So when the Buddha said, "There is mother and father," he meant the opposite: that you do owe something to your parents. You owe a debt of gratitude because they were able to make the choice of whether they were going to care for you or not. It was their choice not to abort the pregnancy. It was their choice to teach you about the world: how to walk, how to talk, how to behave. And regardless of how foolish they may have been in other ways—

and the Buddha admits that there are parents who are stingy and unvirtuous and pretty ignorant—even then you owe a huge debt of gratitude to them for what they've done, because they had to make some difficult choices. It's not an easy thing to give birth to a child or to raise a child, and yet they made the difficult choice.

That's what marks the whole issue of gratitude: People have the power to make choices. When the Buddha talks about gratitude, the language he uses focuses on words that derive from the root for action: *kar* in Pali. There's *upakari,* the person who helped you to begin with and to whom you owe a debt of gratitude. It literally means someone who acted first. And your response to that person should be that you are going to act in return, *patikarosi.*And even the word gratitude itself, *kataññu,* means that you know what was done, you appreciate what was done.

So gratitude is not just a general appreciation. It's specifically an appreciation for actions, realizing that you have a debt coming from other people's kind actions, a debt that requires you to do something in return. You have to return the goodness. And again, even though your parents may have been abusive, still the Buddha says you try to repay them by teaching them or at least being a good example for them. He says if your parents are stingy, you try to induce them to become more generous; if your parents are not virtuous, you try to induce them to be more virtuous; if they have no faith in the principle of action, you try to develop that sense of faith and conviction in them; and if they're not wise, you try to teach them the ways of wisdom. Of course, it's difficult to teach your parents. They don't like being taught by their children, but you can teach by example. That's one way of repaying the debt.

But then there are cases where your parents are no longer around—or the people who helped you are no longer around, as in the case of Luang Pu Suwat, who was the first to think up the idea that we should have this monastery here. So how do you repay your debt to him? You think about his original intention and you try to maintain that intention: the goodness of his choice, the goodness of his ideas. You appreciate that goodness and then you try to act in a way that extends that goodness further through time. His intention was to have a place where people could practice: quiet, secluded, with trees we could sit under.

Think about the time of the Buddha, who was born under a tree, gained awakening under a tree, gave his first sermon under a tree, and passed away under a tree. To use Ajaan Suwat's words, "The institution of Buddhism was

established in the forest." So he wanted there to be a place where you could really be out in the trees, out in the wilds, that offers both the seclusion that's needed to practice and also some of the difficulties. We miss some of the conveniences of life in town here or at least we don't have them, and it's a good test. If things were very comfortable, very easy, and very convenient, you'd have no test against which to measure your greed, aversion, and delusion. But the hardships aren't so overwhelming that we can't practice: That's the whole point. So that was his intention for starting this place. That's the meaning of this place. To keep maintaining the meaning of the place, you want to keep practicing. We're indebted to the people who've made this possible, and so the best way to repay that debt is to focus on the practice.

The Thai way of expressing this is that other people have started weaving something and so you continue the weaving. You don't let the edges get all frayed. This is what gratitude is all about: It's a sense not only that you appreciate the choices that people made but also that you need to respond. The word *patikaroti* means to repay or to make amends, but it can also mean to imitate. In other words, you imitate the goodness that they did, the intention that they had. You try to carry that out. That's the response that keeps their goodness alive.

There's that question that people would often ask Ajaan Fuang: "How can I repay you for having taught me?" and his response was, "Be really intent on the practice." That's the best repayment right there.

So this is why the Buddha's teachings on gratitude are all surrounded by words that deal with action. You appreciate someone's good actions and then you realize there's an action that's called for from you, an appropriate response. That's what makes it different from appreciation or contentment. As the Buddha said, it's a characteristic of a good person to feel gratitude and to want to repay that debt in one way or another. This is why Ajaan Fuang would often say, if he saw someone who was ungrateful to his or her parents, that you don't want to have anything to do with that person, for that person doesn't value goodness. If that person doesn't value the goodness of his or her parents, you can't trust that person to be good to you. Gratitude means that you value goodness; you appreciate the difficulties that are involved in making the skillful choice and carrying it out. When you appreciate that and have gratitude for it, you're more likely to make the same kind of effort yourself.

So keep in mind the distinction between gratitude on the one hand and

attitudes like appreciation or contentment on the other. Someone said recently that gratitude is wanting what you have. That’s actually a description of contentment or appreciation. Gratitude is more focused. It’s focused on actions: the actions you’ve benefited from and the actions you feel called on to make in response to repay your debt of gratitude and to try to continue this stream of goodness into the world, on into the future, so all of the benefits that have been entrusted to us will bear fruit. That’s how we show that we’re worthy of that trust.

An Apprenticeship in Integrity

July 9, 2011

There's a term that the Buddha often yokes with the phrase "the noble ones" and that's "people of integrity." A large part of the training is learning how to develop integrity. It's not just learning a few ideas or a few protocols. It's a quality of the heart, of your behavior, of your character. And it takes more than just understanding words to develop integrity. You need a well-directed intention, and some good examples to absorb.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about seven qualities of a person of integrity. Of the seven, two have to do with things that you can learn from books or from listening. But the other five have to do with things you can pick up only by being around people of integrity and trying to become a person of integrity yourself.

The two qualities you can learn from books or from listening are knowledge of the Dhamma and knowledge of the meaning of the Dhamma. You can learn the Dhamma by listening and by reading, and a good part of the meaning you can pick up by trying to figure things out: reading one sutta and then reading another one, comparing what they have to say, trying to get a sense of what the Buddha meant when he was talking about, say, suffering or emptiness or any of those big terms that play a major role in the way he taught. But even here, it really helps to live around a person who has practiced the Dhamma, for it helps to put your ideas about the purpose and meaning of the Dhamma into perspective. Emptiness may seem to mean one thing in the abstract, but when you sense emptiness as it's embodied in another person it can mean something else entirely.

As for the other five qualities, the first is having a sense of yourself: where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are, where you can trust yourself, where you can't trust yourself, where you need to work on yourself. You could look in a whole library of books, you could look through the entire Internet, and you would never find that kind of knowledge. You have to look at yourself in action and you also have to be around people of integrity so you get a sense of where you do and don't measure up—and how they see where you do and don't measure up. It's not just a matter of your own opinion. You have to listen to their opinions, be sensitive to their standards. You have to read not only

their words, but also their behavior and their body language.

This is why the Buddha put so much emphasis on choosing a good teacher. You want a teacher who has high standards and holds to them, lives by them. That way you get to pick up high standards, too. The sense of your own strengths and weaknesses—and particularly this issue of where you can trust yourself and where you can't—takes a lot of time and sensitivity to develop. As the Buddha said, you have to be very observant and watch for a long time to gain this kind of knowledge.

Another aspect of a person of integrity's knowledge is having a sense of time and place. Again, you can learn this only by being in lots of different times and lots of different places and being around someone who is sensitive to time and place to see how that person deals with these times and places: when's the time to speak, when's the time not to speak; when's the time to act, when's the time not to act. That's something you can pick up only by being around someone who has developed that kind of sensitivity. And it requires that you be sensitive, too, that you be open to that person's influence. At the same time, you have to learn how to close yourself off to the influence of people who don't have that sense.

Another aspect of integrity is having a sense of enough: how much is enough sleep, how much is enough food, how much is enough talk, how much is too little. You can extend these questions into all the areas of your life. And again, you can pick this up only by being around other people who have a sense of enough. It's all too easy to fall into a part of society where the values are really, really strange as to what constitutes enough. You hear about politicians who seem to be honest enough when you vote for them, but then they get into a different circle of friends or a different circle of society, and what was enough before is suddenly not enough. They stop being honest because they have to become two-faced in straddling two societies, showing one face to you and another to the society they want to inhabit, where there are different standards for what's worth competing over and what counts as success. So again, you want to find someone who has a really clear sense of what's enough and what's not enough based on the Buddha's reflections on the requisites—how much food is really enough, how much clothing, how much shelter, how much medicine.

Another aspect of integrity is having a sense of groups of people. The Buddha describes this as knowing how to behave around brahmans, how to

behave around noble warriors, and so forth. For us, this would include knowing how to behave around upper class people, lower class people, people with a lot of education, people with very little education. How do you talk to people less educated than you so that they won't feel you're talking down to them? How do you talk to people above you on the social scale so they won't feel you're after their money? More importantly, how do you talk with people, how do you behave toward them in a way that you can communicate with them but not get sucked into whatever weird values they may have? Having a sense of groups like this is not just a matter of being pleasing to them. It's also a matter of holding to your standards. How do you not get sucked into their standards? How do you do that in such a way that you're not cutting off all ties with those people? This is a delicate issue. To learn this, you have to be around the sort of person who has that kind of sense and demonstrates it in action.

Finally there's a sense of how to judge people. According to the Buddha's standards, you judge people by the extent to which they're really sincere in wanting to learn the Dhamma. Once they've learned the Dhamma, to what extent are they sincere in trying to understand it? Once they understand it, to what extent do they try to apply it to their lives? Those are the areas where you judge people. You don't judge them by their race; you don't judge them by their occupation; you don't judge them by their age. The whole point of this, of course, is that the standards you use to judge other people are the ones you want to use to judge yourself. To what extent are you sincerely interested in the Dhamma, sincerely interested in putting it into practice? These are values that you pick up by being around people who exemplify them, people who are people of integrity.

This is one of the reasons why the relationship that the Buddha prescribed for a teacher and a student is one of an apprenticeship. The word *antevasika,* which they use for the student of a mentor in the monkhood, is the same word for apprentice in all kinds of occupations. The various protocols of the apprentice—how the student is supposed to behave in relationship to the preceptor, in relationship to the mentor—are very much an apprentice kind of relationship. You live together. In fact that's the word for the student who lives with a preceptor: *saddhimviharika,*one who lives together. You live with your preceptor. You spend a lot of time with the preceptor; you regard the preceptor as your father; the preceptor's supposed to regard you as his son. And you

really look after each other. When the preceptor's sick, you look after him; when you're sick, the preceptor looks after you. You learn to get sensitive to the preceptor's needs because you're not just trying to pick up verbal knowledge from him. You want to gain a sense of him as a person in all sorts of situations. What did this person learn from the training when he was apprenticed? What kind of qualities did he pick up?

I don't know if I can exemplify all the qualities that Ajaan Fuang exemplified, but one quality in particular that I really felt comfortable with and I really admired him for, was his solidity in the face of antagonism. There were pressures from the local people to drop this rule, drop that rule, play favorites this way or that, and he wouldn't give in, wouldn't give in. He was solid across the board. If that meant being unpopular, that was perfectly fine with him.

Once he was going to choose the treasurer for the monastery and he finally spotted someone he felt he could trust. But just to make sure, he asked the guy a question. It was an interesting question. He said, "Which would you prefer? To be popular or to be wealthy?" And the guy said, "I'd rather be wealthy because if you have money you can buy popularity." Ajaan Fuang liked the answer. Take that and think about it for a while. When you're dealing with someone who's caring for the money at the monastery, you don't want someone who's concerned about being popular. That sort of person will give in to pressure one way or another to misuse the monastery funds. And sure enough I saw the treasurer have to stand up to a lot of pressure. Successfully. He was a good example to be around.

So learning the Dhamma is not just a matter of reading books and understanding the words in the books. It's a matter of picking up good habits of observing, habits of walking, and habits of looking, talking. Everything you do is part of the training. Which is why the Dhamma's not so much something you find in books; it's a quality of the heart you can absorb over time by being observant.

This is something that's lost nowadays. People think they can read the Dhamma and interpret it in whatever way they want and then set themselves up as Dhamma teachers. I was just reading recently someone saying, "Well, as we all know, meaning is a construct, meaning is something you create, so everybody has the freedom to read whatever meaning they want out of the texts and nobody can say that anyone else is wrong." With that attitude, the Dhamma

becomes just one more thing to be creative about. But that wasn't the Buddha's purpose in teaching. His purpose was to lay out the steps of what's required to put an end to suffering—what works and doesn't work. And he learned what works and doesn't work by testing things in action. Then, when he had tested the Dhamma and tested himself, he taught the Dhamma and set up a social framework to help pass the entire body of skills along.

So the texts are there within a context. The teachings of the Dhamma, the rules of the Vinaya, are all in this context of the apprenticeship: picking up qualities of the heart, picking up a sense of values, from being around someone whose behavior is Dhamma. After all, the whole idea of putting an end to suffering is a very strong statement of values right there—that this is *the* important issue in life. When the Buddha was talking about the four noble truths, he wasn't just telling us information about the four noble truths. He was asserting a value, that this is the most important way of looking at things to help attain the most important goal you can set for yourself: putting an end to suffering. So to understand him, you have to understand not only the words he uses to describe suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation, you have to understand why all this is important, why he gives this such high priority.

When Westerners first encountered the texts out of context, they'd say, "Oh, this is a very selfish, very narrow approach to spiritual life." But my experience of going to Thailand and living with the ajaans was these were not selfish or narrow people at all. They really had something special and they wanted to share it. This was evident in everything they did.

So there's the aspect of the Dhamma that you can pick up only by being around people who've trained in the Dhamma, who have been trained by their teachers who in turn were well-trained: people who've been willing to apprentice themselves, to pick up the values. In the past, this aspect of direct personal example was highly valued, not just in the area of the Dhamma but in terms of other skills as well. There are a lot of old skills that used to be practiced in Thailand that have died out because the teachers didn't see anyone worthy of passing them on to. And the question of worthiness had to do with the character of the student.

I once became friends with a woman in Bangkok, Paa Phaa, who had been born in the palace. Her father had been the head musician of the royal orchestra composed of xylophones, gongs, and other classical Thai instruments during

the time of Rama VI. So Paa Phaa was born in the palace and spent her childhood there, part of which involved learning how to cook from the palace cooks. And she learned her lessons well; she knew all kinds of clever and unusual cooking skills. Even after she had left the palace and had to make a living on her own after her husband died, she developed a really good reputation as a cook. In fact, other women came to study with her. She told me once, though, that one woman in particular—a mutual acquaintance—was really begging her to teach her how to cook, and her response was, "I don't want to teach this woman; she's too flighty." You may not think that flightiness had anything to do with cooking, but her attitude was that she had something really valuable in her cooking knowledge and she didn't want to waste her time training someone who didn't have the character to be a good cook. As far as I know, she ended up teaching only three other people how to cook. And her highest praise for me one time was when she said, "You know, if you were a layperson, I'd teach you how to cook." I took that as a huge compliment.

So what we're learning here is not just the words. It's a quality of the heart and a quality of the character. If you're open to learning that dimension, these are the things you have to look at: gaining a sense of yourself; gaining a sense of time and place; gaining a sense of how much is enough, how much is too little, how much is too much; getting a sense of how to behave around different groups of people; and then gaining a sense of how to judge people by their character so that you start judging yourself by *your* character. You need to develop integrity in order to know what integrity is. All of these qualities go together and they play a huge part in the training.

So it's not just a meditation technique that we're learning here, and not just a few statements about the truth. We're learning how to be a true person, a person of integrity, trying to adopt and live up to the same standards the Buddha used when he defined what a person of integrity was.

The Breath All the Way

October 2, 2010

Mindfulness of breathing, keeping the breath in mind, is the meditation theme the Buddha taught more than any other, and he praised it highly. He said that it can take you all the way to clear knowledge and release: clear knowledge of awakening, release from all suffering and stress. It's also the meditation theme he taught in most detail. You can think of it as your home as a meditator. You may need to go foraging out in other areas, using other themes to deal with specific problems that come up in the mind, but it's good to have the breath as home base, a safe place you come back to.

The Buddha was once advising the monks to practice breath meditation, and one of the monks said, "I already practice breath meditation." So the Buddha asked him, "What kind of breath meditation do you practice?" The monk replied, "I put aside thoughts of the past, don't hanker after thoughts of the future, and try to keep the mind at equanimity in the present as I breathe in, breathe out." The Buddha said, "Well, there *is* that kind of breath meditation but it's not the most beneficial, not the most productive." Then he went on to teach breath meditation in sixteen steps.

So it's good to know the steps, because these are the most effective ways of making the breath into your home base.

The steps come in four sets, and each set follows a pattern: You sensitize yourself to an aspect of the mind focusing on the breath in the present, then you notice how that aspect is fabricated—in other words, how it's shaped by your present intentions—and then you try to calm the fabrication. In the first set, the aspect is the breath itself, as part of your experience of the body. In the second set, the aspect you're focusing on concerns the feelings created by the way you pay attention to the breath. In the third set, the aspect you're focusing on is the state of the mind as it tries to stay with the breath. And in the fourth set, you focus on the mental qualities that are involved in developing dispassion for the whole process of fabrication.

Because of the focus on fabrication, this is an insight practice. Because you're using your understanding of fabrication to bring those fabrications to calm, it's a tranquility practice. So you're working on insight and tranquility in tandem, which makes this an ideal practice for awakening.

You begin with a simple exercise to make you sensitive to the breath, being mindful to notice when the breath is long and when it's short. You can expand on this exercise to notice other variations in your breathing as well: when it's heavy or light, deep or shallow, noticing whether it's comfortable or not. When you can be sensitive to these variations in the breath, the Buddha gets you to become more actively involved in the breathing process. You train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, aware of the whole body as you breathe out. This requires some skill and practice, for you have to learn how to expand your sense of awareness and keep it expanded throughout the body without at the same time losing focus.

One way to approach this is to practice going through the body section by section, noticing how the sensation of breathing feels in different parts of the body. How does it feel in your abdomen? How does it feel in your chest? How does it feel in your head? How does it feel in your back, in your shoulders, your arms, your legs? Remember that breathing is a whole-body process. We think of it primarily as the air coming in and out of the lungs, but there's an energy flow that goes throughout the entire body each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. It's beneficial to be aware of it in the different parts of the body to make sure it's comfortable in each part and that the different parts are working together and not at cross purposes.

So make a survey throughout the different parts of the body to familiarize yourself with how the breathing feels. That right there is a project that can occupy you for the whole hour. You can do it for many days to get more and more sensitive to the breathing. Think of it as a way of showing goodwill for yourself and goodwill for other people—goodwill in the sense that, as you're learning how to breathe comfortably, you're learning how to create a sense of wellbeing that doesn't have to depend on things outside. It just feels good breathing in, feels good breathing out. When the breathing feels good, you're going to be much less irritable, much less likely to feel oppressed by the situations around you. So even when things go badly outside, you don't sense that they're weighing on you, because you've got your own space right here where you can still breathe comfortably. Having this safe inner space is an act of kindness for others as well, because when you're coming from a comfortable spot here, a comfortable sensation here in the body, you're less likely to act on greed, aversion, delusion, or any of the other ways of being unskillful with others. That way, other people will suffer less from your

defilements.

This is an essential principle throughout the Buddha's teachings: that if you care for your mind really well, you're not the only person who benefits. The image that the Buddha gives is of two acrobats. The story goes that an acrobat once said to his assistant, "Okay. You get up on my shoulders and we'll get on top of the bamboo pole. Then you look out after me and I'll look out after you, and that way we'll come down safely." But his assistant said, "No, that's not going to work at all. You look out after yourself, I'll look out after myself, and that way we help one another to come down safely."

In other words, you look out after your balance, because you can't really look out for other people's balance. The best way you can help them is to look out after your balance, and in doing so you don't knock them off balance. So, in helping yourself, you're helping others.

This is true for all the Buddha's teachings. When you're generous, you help yourself and you help others. When you're virtuous, you help yourself and you help others. When you spread thoughts of goodwill, you help yourself, you help others. When you meditate in other ways, you help yourself and you help others. This helps to blur the line between who's helping whom, or who's going to benefit from your practice. You're not the only person benefiting when you're meditating—in the same way that, when you're generous with other people, they're not the only people benefiting. You're benefiting as well.

The Buddha teaches a form of happiness that doesn't have boundaries. And as a step in that direction, you need to train your awareness to be more expansive until its boundaries dissolve. This is what you start doing in the third and fourth steps of the first set, where you train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. Then you try to calm the breathing. This doesn't mean that you stifle it or stop it. It simply means that you allow the breath energies to interconnect and grow more coordinated so that breath naturally grows more gentle. In any places where the breath feels harsh, you think of it getting lighter and more soothing.

One way you can do this is to think of the breath energy coming in and out of the body through every pore, so it requires less effort on your part to breathe in, to breathe out.

That's the first set of four steps in breath meditation: being aware of short breathing, long breathing, training yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out, and then training yourself to allow the breath to

grow calm as you breathe in, breathe out, so it feels gentle and soothing.

The next four steps have to do with feelings. First you train yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture. The word *rapture* here can also mean refreshment. Ask yourself, what kind of breathing would feel refreshing right now? Remember that feelings don't simply come and go on their own. The mind helps to fabricate them—in other words, there's an intentional element in every feeling. The way you focus on the breath can give rise to feelings of refreshment, if you do it right. So, ask yourself, "How can I breathe in a way that would feel refreshing, feel full throughout the body, full as I breathe in, full even as I breathe out?" Once you've mastered that, the next step is to breathe in a way that feels easeful and pleasant. The difference between refreshment and pleasure is that refreshment is like coming across a glass of water after you've been out in the desert. It's a very intense, energetic pleasure—sometimes so intense or overwhelming that it's actually unpleasant. Pleasure, however, is cooler, gentler, more easeful. Once the breath gives rise to feelings of ease, the Buddha tells you to breathe in and out sensitive to what he calls *mental fabrication,* to see how the feelings induced by the breath have an effect on your mind, and how your perceptions have an effect on the mind as well.

Perceptions are labels—the words or mental images you apply to things to identify them to yourself, such as the labels you apply to the breath. What kind of mental image do you have of the breathing? If you think of the body as a big bellows that you have to pump to pull the breath in and push the breath out, that's going to make the breath coarse and tiresome. It's not going to be so easeful and soothing for the mind. But if you think of the body as a large sponge, with lots of holes that allow the breath to come in and go out, just holding that perception in mind eases the breathing process. It's also a more easeful perception to hold in your mind. It has a more calming effect on the mind.

If you find that your breathing is laborious, you can think of the breath energy coming in and out of the forehead, down from the top of the head, in through your eyes, in through your ears, in from the back of the neck going down your back, in at your throat going down through the chest to the heart. Just hold those images in mind and see what impact they have on the breathing and on your mind.

In the next step, the Buddha says to try to find the perception or feeling that's most calming to the mind. If you find that the sponge perception is more

calming, you hold on to that. If it's more easeful to think of the breath coming down from the top of the head, or in and out of the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet, then hold those perceptions in mind. There are lots of different perceptions you can play with. Try to find the ones that are most calming for you right here, right now.

Those are the four steps that deal with feeling.

The next four steps deal with the mind. To begin with, you just want to be aware of the state of your mind as you breathe in, the state of your mind as you breathe out. As you do this, you want to notice if it's in balance or out of balance. If it's out of balance, there are different ways you can deal with it.

If the mind is feeling depressed, sluggish, or stale, ask yourself how you could breathe in, how you could breathe out in a way that would be gladdening to the mind. What kind of breathing would give energy to the mind, give refreshment to the mind? Or you can branch out and use other topics of meditation to gladden the mind as well. Think about the Buddha, to see if that creates a sense of gladness. Try thinking about the Dhamma, the Sangha. See if that gives a sense of gladness. Think about the times you've been virtuous or generous in the past, and see if that's encouraging. In other words, any Dhamma topic that helps to gladden the mind: You can bring that in and use it. Then, when it's done its work, go back to the breath and try to maintain that sense of gladness.

Alternatively, if the mind is feeling scattered or restless, what kind of breathing could steady it? Or what other meditation topics could steady it? Here you might find that if you're feeling lazy and don't really want to meditate, you can focus on the reflection on death, or on those five reflections we chanted just now: remembering that you're subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. The only things you really can hold onto are your actions. Where do your actions come from? They come from the mind. And if your mind isn't trained, what's it going to do? A lot of unskillful things. So the best way to prepare for aging, illness, and death is to train the mind. Thinking about death can have a riveting effect on the mind.

You can try the contemplation that the Buddha recommends: Every morning at dawn, as you see the sun rise, remind yourself: This could be your last sunrise. Are you ready to go? The usual answer is No. Well, why not? What changes need to be made in the mind so that you would be ready to go? After all, very few people know, at sunrise, that this is going to be their last day.

You could be one of those people. So you don't want to be heedless; you don't want to be caught off guard. Thinking in this way is an encouragement to practice. It focuses the mind. Then again, at sunset, the Buddha said, remind yourself that this could be your last sunset; you might die tonight. Are you ready to go? If the answer is No, you've got work to do. And you know what work you've got to do: You need to train the mind—at the very least, get it more steady, more resilient. Train it to let go of all its foolish attachments. That requires work. You need training. When these thoughts have focused the mind, bring that focus back to the breath.

Finally, if the mind is feeling burdened, figure out how to release it from its burdens, particularly if it's being burdened with unskillful thinking. These might be thoughts of sensuality or thoughts of anger. How can you let go of those? Sometimes you focus on the object of the thinking, sometimes on the thinking itself. If the object is one that excites desire, look at the side that's not so desirable. This is why we have the contemplation of the body. The body may look pretty on the surface, but if you took off the skin, you couldn't look at it at all. You'd run away. And yet why is it, with just that little film of skin wrapping it up, that we perceive it as attractive? What's the mind doing to itself? What games is it playing with itself, so it focuses only on the things that it perceives as attractive, and blots out everything else?

Similarly with anger: Usually, when you're feeling angry at somebody, all you can do is focus on their unattractive side, the unappealing side, the unpleasant side. You can work yourself up into a real fury. But are you really being fair? Are you being fair to the other person? Are you being fair to yourself? After all, who's suffering from your anger? You're certainly suffering from it right now.

So if you find that the mind is being burdened by things like this, you find ways of unburdening it. The Buddha takes this even deeper, into the subtlest levels of concentration. Each level has a certain element of stress that's very subtle, but it's there. When the mind gets focused on a level of concentration, sit with it for a while to get to know it really well, until you recognize what's really going on in that state of concentration. This can take a while, because when you first hit a new level of concentration, you often don't really see the whole thing. You see that the mind seems less stressful than before. You don't see any stress in this concentration at all. But you have to get familiar with it until you begin to see that there is still a little bit of inconstancy, a little bit of

wavering in the concentration, or there are certain mental activities that are a little bit burdensome—not much, but enough so that you can notice the variations in the stress. When you notice these activities and can see that they're unnecessary, then you can drop them.

This last step combines both insight and tranquility: insight into the tranquility, and tranquility in response to the insight. As the Buddha says, insight is what releases the mind from ignorance; tranquility is what releases the mind from passion. They have to work together for the release from any burden—from the gross to the refined—to be complete.

That's the last of the steps dealing with the state of the mind as a whole. But it moves you into the final set of four steps, which have to do with what they call *dhammas,* or mental qualities: the component factors that go into shaping the state of the mind.

The first step in this final set is learning how to look at inconstancy. Sometimes this word, *anicca,* is translated as impermanence, but the issue is not so much that things are impermanent, it's just that they keep changing unreliably. If you think about that mountain over there, the mountain is impermanent, but you can tell yourself, "At least it's solid enough for me. I could build a house on it and not worry about the ocean washing it away in my lifetime." But if you apply the perception of inconstancy to the things you depend on for your happiness, you see that if there's even the slightest bit of change or unreliability in those things, it's threatening. That's what the Buddha is pointing to. There are so many things in life that we pin our happiness on, pin our hopes on, but you have to look carefully at them to see if they really are dependable. They change right before your eyes. Even the state of concentration, which in the beginning seems so solid, after a while shows some wavering. It, too, has its ups and downs. And so the question is, What's causing that? What is the mind doing that's creating that rise and fall in the level of stress?

This is where you begin to get into the four noble truths. As the Buddha said, each truth has a duty. The duty with regard to stress is to comprehend it, which means watching it carefully so you can see exactly what it is—in particular, to see where it's coming from and then develop dispassion, both for the stress and for its cause. This is why watching inconstancy is an important part of seeing stress, because it allows you to see that the level of stress will go up and go down, which signals that certain things are happening in the mind

to cause it to go up, and other things are happening to cause it to go down. But what are those things? Feelings and perceptions.

This is why the Buddha has you get sensitive to mental fabrication. What are your perceptions right now? What are the feelings? What are the perceptions that you apply, say, to pleasure, that you apply to pain? And how do they increase or decrease the level of stress in the mind? If you see that they cause an increase, drop them, because that's the duty with regard to the cause of stress: to abandon it, to let it go. You do this by developing the path, which we've been doing all the way through, with all these steps of meditation, so you can induce the sense of dispassion that allows you to abandon the cause of stress. That's why we look at inconstancy: to get a sense of dispassion for the things we're attached to.

You really have to understand what attachment is all about. You're attached to things because they give pleasure, and even when you're attached, you can admit that the pleasure's not constant and that it takes some effort. Still, it seems that you get at least enough pleasure to make the effort worthwhile. But what the Buddha wants you to see is that the pleasure is not worth the effort at all, that the drawbacks of that particular pleasure are much greater than the actual nourishment you get from it. After all, the mind tends to delude itself. It sees its pleasures as wonderful. It paints them up. It dresses them up. It elaborates on them so they seem much more wonderful than they actually are. The Buddha wants you to really look at that fact, that process in action. What is the gratification you get out of that pleasure? What are the drawbacks of that pleasure?

It's through this kind of analysis that you gain the insight allowing you actually to let go of things. If you simply see things as empty, as changing in line with conditions, you can drop them temporarily, but they come back because there's still a part of the mind that says, "Well, even if they're changing with conditions, the pleasure I get out of them is worth the effort I put into getting those conditions right." That's what you have to look into. Where is the actual pleasure here? Where is the effort? Where's the pain and stress in the effort? Do they give you a good deal or a bad deal? That's what it comes down to: What kind of deal are you giving yourself? The Buddha has you look at this until you see how you've been fooling yourself. To see the foolishness on both sides—the side that likes to deceive and the side that likes to be deceived—gives rise to a sense of disenchantment and dispassion.

That's the next step, focusing on dispassion, because it's through passion that we get involved with things to begin with. We get attached to them. We create these things. As the Buddha said, in every experience of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness, there's an intentional element. A thought arises in the mind and you get involved, turning it into a state of becoming, a little world in which you can dwell. A feeling arises, and you elaborate on it. A perception arises and either you go with it or you don't. But there's a choice being made there. Sometimes the arising of these things comes from past kamma, but then it's up to you to decide whether you want to go with them or not. That decision is your present kamma.

It's like somebody driving up in a car and saying, "Okay, jump in, let's go." You actually have the choice to jump in or not jump in, and if you're wise you're going to ask, "Who are you? Where are you going? What's going to happen if I jump in?" That's if you're wise, because it turns out that this is not going to be a free ride. You're going to have to pay for the gas. Will it be worth it? You may actually have to pedal the car, if it turns out to be a pedal car. Is it worth it? And where is the driver planning to take you? Is he going to rob you, kill you, and dump you off the side of the road? When you see that it's not worth it, your mind grows calm in the face of any temptation to jump in the car. That's the tranquility that follows on discernment and releases you from passion. Dispassion comes in its place, and when the dispassion comes, fabrications begin to stop—because what keeps them going is your passion. When there's no passion, fabrications all cease. So you watch them ceasing, ceasing, ceasing, because of dispassion. That's the third step in the last set of four: focusing on cessation.

Then the final step of breath meditation is to stay focused on relinquishment as you breathe in and out. You let go of everything. Even the path gets abandoned at this point because you don't need it anymore. It's like having a set of tools. As long as you have to work with the tools, you take good care of them, you look after them. But there comes a point when the job is done and you let even the tools go. In other words, all your attachment even to the path—the concentration, the discernment—gets abandoned at that point as well—each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out.

So this is the kind of breath meditation, the Buddha says, that gives great rewards. It develops the four establishings of mindfulness; it develops all the seven factors for awakening. You're developing mindfulness in keeping the

breath in mind. As you analyze how you're doing this practice skillfully or unskillfully, how you're fabricating your sense of the body and mind in the present through the breath and the feelings and perceptions around the breath, that develops the analysis of qualities as a factor for awakening. You try to do your best to fabricate these things in skillful ways, and abandon any unskillful fabrications: That's your persistence, energy, effort as a factor for awakening. As you do these things skillfully, refreshment and ease arise: Those are the rapture and the serenity factors for awakening. You develop concentration and the ability to watch with equanimity all these things as they're happening. When you have all these seven factors together, they're the qualities you need to bring the mind to awakening. And these factors are all being developed as you practice these sixteen steps.

As the Buddha said, these factors lead to knowledge and release—the knowledge of awakening, understanding what the mind's been doing that's been causing stress, how it can let go of the cause. When you've completed all the duties with regard to the four noble truths, the mind is released and no longer creates any unnecessary burdens for itself. It tastes the deathless.

So this is what breath meditation can do. It's not just a preliminary exercise. It's a path that can take you all the way. You can augment it with other practices, as I've said. When the mind needs gladdening or steadying, when you find that you're stuck with unskillful mental qualities, you can use other techniques to pry the mind free from them. But the breath is where you always come back. It's your home because it's right here, where the body and the mind meet. It's the ideal place to watch both what's going on in the body and what's going on in the mind. And it's one of the few bodily functions you can control to give rise to a sense of wellbeing that allows you to stay steadily right here.

This way you can begin to see things as they actually are, as they're actually happening and being fabricated, to see where your habits of fabrication are causing unnecessary suffering and stress. You come to see that the stress is actually unnecessary. There are choices you're making as you fabricate your experience out of the raw materials that come from past actions and, through the path, you learn how to make these choices more and more skillful to the point where there's really nothing more to do. Everything is at perfect equilibrium. Any further intention—either to stay there or to move on—would just cause stress. And you see this clearly. At that point the mind lets go.

So whatever other meditation you practice, make sure that at the very least you've got your home base covered. As the Buddha said, when you get involved in other meditation topics, unskillful states can sometimes arise, in which case you should always come back to the breath. He compared it to the beginning of the rainy season in India. During the hot season everything is dry with lots and lots of dust in the air. But when the first rains come, they wash all the dust out of the air and leave the air very clean, clear, and refreshing. The same way with breath meditation: When you do it right, it can clear the mind, refresh the mind, wash away all its dust.

So give time to this skill because it's the most basic skill in training the mind. It's your foundation, and you want to make sure the foundation is strong. If you try to build a building with a weak foundation, it's going to fall over. No matter how beautiful the building may be, it's going to collapse. But when the foundation is strong, you can build as many stories as you like and you don't have to worry about them falling down at all.

Your Main Foundation

November 21, 2011

When you focus on the breath, you've got all four frames of reference right here. The breath is a manifestation of the body. Then there are feelings. Feelings can either be physical or mental. They come basically down to pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain. Then you've got mind states, such as a mind that's impassioned, a mind that's not impassioned, a mind that's aversive or not. This analysis of mind states works its way up to more subtle things, like a mind that's concentrated or not, or a mind that has reached a state beyond which it has ever been before or not. Those deal with more refined states of concentration. And then finally there are mental qualities, things that get in the way of your concentration like the hindrances, or things that help your concentration, like the factors for awakening.

Often it's hard to make clear distinctions among these things, especially on the mental side. For example, with mental feelings: The feeling part of the mental feeling is the feeling tone, either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. But rarely do we have feelings that are simply positive, or negative, or neutral. We have stories that go along with them and color the particular feeling. Those stories come from perception and fabrication in the mind, which gets you more into the framework of mind states or mental qualities.

Also, the line between mind states and mental qualities is very hard to pin down. You might think of the mind state as being when the whole mental committee has agreed on something, whereas the mental qualities are the specific members of the committee.

The clearest line is between bodily phenomena and mental phenomena, and that's an important distinction to focus on. You've got the breath coming in and going out, and then you've got the mind here, liking and disliking, making up all kinds of stories, and then reacting to those stories one way or another: either seeing a story as really fascinating and wanting to follow through with it, or realizing that it's not a very skillful story and learning how to separate yourself out from it. That's one of the ways in which these different ways of analyzing mental phenomena are helpful. When you can see mental phenomena simply as mental phenomena, and not as a world that you've got to enter into or one that you've got to believe, that gives you a certain measure of safety right there, a

certain amount of protection, the ability to pull yourself out.

This is where the body is helpful. When you can stay with the sensation of the body, that helps to prevent you from getting totally wrapped up in a particular mind state. Think of the fact that you've got breath here, you've got the different elements: earth, water, fire, that you feel as solidity, liquidity, warmth. If you keep these as your frame of reference, it helps keep you from being sucked into the other frames of reference, or helps you see them as frames of reference rather than getting sucked into them as worlds.

When the Buddha talked about a practice that helps develop all four frames of reference, he pointed to breath meditation. With every framework, you're always conscious of the breath, regardless of whether you're dealing with body, feelings, mind states, or mental qualities. You never lose your reference to the breath, even when you're trying to develop things like dispassion: You try to breathe in a way that develops dispassion or you notice how you're breathing when dispassion arises. You notice how you're breathing as you're contemplating inconstancy. You try to stay anchored here with the body.

This is why so much is focused here, because if you don't have this anchor, it's like being pulled into the clouds, carried off by the winds. You don't know where you'll eventually come down to earth. But when you have something to anchor yourself to the ground, you don't get pulled away. There may be some pull, but you can resist it. You don't lose your bearings and you know where you are.

So it's important to realize how much you need to have a really solid foundation here with the body, and not be in too great a hurry to move on to some other frame of reference. Even when you're aware of feelings or mind states, you want to have your body here as a post. Remember the image the Buddha gave of the six different types of animals tied together by a leash. If they're not tied to a post, then whichever animal happens to be strongest is going to drag all the rest off in the direction it wants to go. But if they're tied to a post, they can only go so far, and it doesn't matter which one is stronger than the others. They're all right here.

Then as you're right here, you can notice what else is going on inside the mind. It's not that when you're aware of the breath you're aware only of the breath and not of the mind. In fact, what usually happens is, as the breath gets more and more calm, more and more subtle, to the point that it stops, you see the activity of the mind more and more clearly. When the breath stops, it's not

because you're holding the breath but simply because the activity of the mind is so calm that you're not in need of a lot of oxygen, you're not using up a lot of oxygen, you're not creating a lot of carbon dioxide in the bloodstream. So there's not that much need for your in and out breathing. Simply maintaining a perception of the breath channels in the body all being open and all connected with one another is enough to keep you going. When the breath is that still, then the events of the mind become more and more prominent, and you can watch them from that stillness. The stillness can be your foundation.

At that point you can work with the other elements. Ajaan Fuang used to tell his students—once they reached the stage in the meditation where the breath got really calm and still—to focus first on the warmth in the body. What's the warmest spot in the body right now? Focus there, and think of the warmth spreading out from that spot. Then you can do the same thing with the water property, which he identified as the feelings of coolness. Where do you feel coolest right now? Can you balance the two? It's like playing with the dials on a new stereo. You turn up the volume, turn it down, play with the balance, until you get something that feels just right. Then you do the same, balancing the breath energy with the sense of earth. Sometimes if you get really into the earth element, everything gets really heavy, and it can get really unpleasant, so you want to balance it out a bit.

What you're learning about here is the power of perception, the labels you place on things, and how perception can have a huge impact on your feeling tone. So right there you're playing with feelings and mind states. At the same time, you're gaining a sense of what's skillful and not, which equates with analysis of qualities, one of the factors for awakening. So you've got dhammas, or mental qualities, there too. It's hard to meditate without getting everything engaged like this. But when the breath is really still—this is one of the reasons we work with it so assiduously—when the breath is very still, then we can see things very clearly, what exactly is going on in the mind, and we can sort out all of the different ways that we glom things together and turn them into huge big sticky forms of suffering.

This is why, when one of Ajaan Fuang's students complained that her practice wasn't making all the fast progress that she wanted, he said, "Look, work on your foundation. Make it good and strong. Don't worry about the insights, don't worry about all the other things that you think lie down the path, because when the foundation is good, that's when the other things are

possible.” If the foundation isn’t good, then everything else is unstable, shaky. You can think about these things, you can play with them a bit, but then they all start to fall apart.

But if your foundation is good, as you stay here with your breath, then you have a foundation for understanding: When the Buddha talks about form, feeling, perception, fabrications, or consciousness, what is he talking about? You can see these things in action. Or feelings, mind states, and mental qualities: You can see them in action because you’ve worked through all the interference that the breath was creating. By staying here with the breath and making it really still, you’ve learned how to pare things down. You have hands-on experience with these different frames of reference, or the different aggregates.

This means that concentration is not something just to step on and then immediately jump off and go someplace else in search of insight. You want to stay here. This is your foundation. Everything else will have to stand on this foundation. So don’t let yourself do a slipshod job here. Be careful, be meticulous, because it’s not just a step on which you place your foot for a bit and then jump off. This is where you’re going to stay. This is your home, your *vihara-dhamma.* Make sure to build it so that it’ll last.

Three Stages in the Practice

May 26, 2010

There are two sides to the practice: the side of letting go and the side of developing. We hear a lot about the letting go and there are many things we do have to let go of. As you're sitting here focusing on the breath, lots of other things will come into the mind and you just have to say no, no, no, no, no. Try to have the discernment that the Buddha compares to a well-plastered fortress wall. The enemy tries to climb up the wall but can't because the plaster's so smooth. You don't want to leave any toeholds or handholds for anything to come into the mind right now—which means that as soon as you see the mind latching onto something aside from the breath, you want to cut it off.

The Buddha also compares discernment to a knife. As soon as you see that something's catching a toehold, you try to cut it right through the toes. If you can let it go that quickly without much more ado, then fine. At other times, though, you actually have to look into it. Why is the mind attracted to that kind of thinking? What pleasure does it get out of it? What gratification? Then look at the drawbacks. As the Buddha said, if you were to sit there and think about that kind of thinking for a long period of time, where would it lead the mind? To a place you want to go or to someplace you'd rather not go?

Remember, your thoughts are not just little bubbles that appear, go pop above your head, and then disappear without trace. They lead to habits; they lead to actions; they have their consequences. That's one thing to contemplate: What are the consequences of this kind of thinking? Where is it going to lead? Sometimes a little tiny thought plants a little seed in the mind and then the seed begins to sprout and send out roots. Even though the mind may seem to have a nice well-plastered wall, the seed will find a crack, like those banyan seeds that find a crack, send out roots, and can take down buildings. Those little tiny seeds can destroy whatever skillful qualities you're trying to develop. So the ability to let go, to abandon, to cut away, is an important part of the meditation.

On the other side, there's the need for *establishing,* of giving rise to skillful qualities in the mind. In terms of right effort, there are actually three levels to developing skillful qualities. One is just giving rise to them. Like focusing on the breath: That's the beginning of concentration. Focusing on the body in and of itself: That's the beginning of mindfulness, the beginning of concentration. If

you find that you've been away from the breath, just come back and re-establish your mindfulness. That's the beginning, the establishing, the giving-rise-to.

Then from the next second on, it's a matter of *developing:* in other words, maintaining and, in the Buddha's words, bringing to culmination. You've done one breath, so now you do two, now three, now four. Just keep at it. Five, six, seven. See how many breaths you can stay with in one continuous long tracking shot. We're not here to make a movie with lots of quick cuts and jumping around. We want to see what world record we can set for long-track meditation. How long you can stay with the breath without getting distracted?

Obviously, the maintaining and the letting go are going to have to work together. As soon as you see that anything has the slightest inclination to exert a pull on the mind, you've got to drop it. One way of working against that pull is to try to make the breath as interesting as possible. Notice when you breathe in: Where do you feel it? Where does the sensation of an in-breath start for you? It may start in a place that it doesn't start for somebody else. How do you know that your body needs an in-breath right now? How can you tell when you've been breathing out too long? As people get older they have a tendency—Ajaan Lee noticed it—to start breathing out too long. They're squeezing out their energy.

If you find that happening, try to shorten your out-breaths. Learn to become more and more sensitive to how you can read the needs of the body and compensate for any bad habits you may have picked up in the way you breathe.

The breath, when it's handled properly, is medicine. It can give you energy when you need energy; it can calm you down when you need calming down. It can help you deal with pain in different parts of the body, as when you learn to breathe around the pain or through the pain so you don't feel so threatened by the pain.

As you're doing this, your meditation becomes a matter of maintaining and developing together. The concentration deepens. It gets more firmly established and begins to show some of its rewards. There's a sense of ease. A sense of refreshment. Just the fact that you haven't been worrying about other things for five minutes is a good sign right there. That's a healthy thing for the mind. And often we overlook that.

That's what the Buddha calls the pleasure that comes from seclusion: simply that you're not going after unskillful thoughts; you keep the mind

secluded from their influence. That brings a certain amount of ease to the mind.

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about devas who are corrupted by play and corrupted in mind. They spend all their time gazing with lust and envy at one another. It wears them out physically and mentally, and so they fall. But you don't have to go to the deva realm to experience the impact of lust and envy. Even here on the human level, a lot of unskillful thinking does just that: It wears you out. So the simple fact that you're not thinking about anything sensual, not paying attention to anything sensual: That allows for a level of pleasure and energy that you should learn how to appreciate.

Then try to maintain it. Allow it to deepen. Allow it to seep into the different parts of your body. This is where rapture begins to appear as the sense of fullness, more and more apparent in the different parts of the body that are not being run over by the moving breath energy. They're allowed to maintain their fullness as you breathe in, as you breathe out.

This is what the Buddha calls the developing of the establishing of mindfulness. There are actually three stages as you establish mindfulness. One is just that: getting it established, giving yourself a frame of reference. And then, as the Buddha says, you develop it by learning how to understand the principle of cause and effect, how things are originated and how they pass away.

Notice, he says "origination" here. He doesn't say just "arising." The word is *samudaya,* origination. You're trying to see how causes act to originate effects. The only way you can know the connection of a cause to an effect is by experimenting. Try different ways of breathing, see how you can give rise to a sense of ease, a sense of pleasure, how you can get rid of any sense of strain or discomfort. As you do that, your concentration gets more and more established; your mindfulness gets more and more established. These two qualities go together.

Sometimes you hear that mindfulness and concentration are two totally antithetical qualities: that mindfulness is a broad, open, acceptance of things, whereas concentration is a narrow focus, exclusive of all else. If that were the case, you couldn't practice mindfulness and concentration together. But that's not how the Buddha described mindfulness and concentration. The two qualities go together. Mindfulness gets fully purified only in the fourth jhana. And the establishings of mindfulness are the themes of concentration. So

they're meant to go together. They're both meant to be settled and broad. All of the analogies the Buddha uses for concentration—water being kneaded through a ball of dough; a cool fount of water welling up into a lake, filling the lake with cool water; lotuses growing in water, saturated with water from their roots to their tips; a person sitting with a white cloth covering his entire body—all of these analogies indicate a large, expansive state of mind. It fills the body but it's settled and secure.

That kind of concentration, in fact, tends to be more firm than the concentration that's focused on a single point because if you're on a single point, then as soon as you move even slightly from that point, your concentration's gone. But if the theme of your concentration is this full-body awareness, then things can come and go within that range of awareness and they don't knock you off your foundation.

So right now we're in the developing stage. In terms of mindfulness, we're learning the principle of cause and effect: how one thing gives rise to something else and how, when the cause passes away, the effect passes away as well. In terms of concentration, we're learning mastery over the concentration, deepening it as we go through more and more refined states of concentration—when the pleasure's not just the pleasure of not thinking about unskillful things or being secluded from them, but actually the pleasure of being more and more focused, confident, and assured about what we're doing. The mind gains greater focus, steadier focus. And so on through the different levels of concentration.

But in dealing with skillful qualities, it's not just a matter of giving rise to them and then maintaining and developing them. There comes a point where they're fully developed and you have to let them go as well. In terms of the practice of mindfulness, there's the point where you can simply take note of the fact you've got the body here, you've got feelings here, or whatever your frame of reference is at that point. And that's it. You're not doing anything else at that stage because you've developed everything to its culmination.

In terms of concentration, the Buddha describes this as fully mastering concentration the same way an archer would master archery. You can fire rapid shots in quick succession, pierce great masses, and shoot great distances. In the same way, you learn how to develop your concentration and how to settle into it, gain the pleasure and the sense of nourishment it can provide. You learn how to develop it in all situations so that it's not just a matter of sitting

here with your eyes closed. You can have a sense of being centered as you walk, as you talk with other people, as you deal with other chores throughout the day.

Ultimately, you learn how to develop dispassion for your concentration by seeing that it, too, is made out of the aggregates, and those aggregates are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. There are subtle vacillations in the pleasure, subtle vacillations in the sense of clarity of your concentration, and you realize that those variations show the element of inconstancy and stress. Then you ask yourself: Is this what you really want in life—a sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing that's still subject to conditions? No matter how nourishing it may be, it's still not the ultimate.

At that point you turn the mind to how good it would be to find a happiness that's deathless. And then you stay right there. Just aware of what's there. This is the third stage of the practice: *non-fashioning*. You're no longer developing anything and your only task at that point is, with whatever comes up, just let it go, let it go. Even the concentration and the activities of mindfulness get let go of as well.

There was a deva who once asked the Buddha, "How did you get across the river?" And the Buddha replied, "By neither pushing forward nor by staying in place." Paradox. There's no intention to stay where you are, and no intention to move to anything anywhere else. A third alternative appears. That's the final level in how you deal with skillful qualities. You'll find this out as you get there. But until you get there, the Buddha allows you to leave it as a paradox—because for the most part we're in much too great a hurry to get there without having done the work.

The work is in the maintaining and the developing. Whatever gets in the way, you let it go, but the skillful qualities are things you want to deepen and develop until you come to the point where you don't have to work at them anymore. You've completed the duty with that particular quality, you've developed it as far as it can go.

It's only then that the really cool stuff comes. Which is not to say that there's not some fairly cool stuff along the way. Having a sense of refreshment that you can tap into whenever you need it: That's not to be sneezed at. But it *is* something you have to work at and develop. It's not just a matter of watching things come and watching things go: "That's okay, there goes concentration, I'm not attached to it." We haven't given it any opportunity to show its

potential. The Buddha *wants* you to get attached to it, to devote yourself to developing it. How else are you going to get free? If you're not attached to concentration, all the little suckers of the mind, like the suckers on an octopus's legs, will stretch out and hold onto all kinds of other things. Concentration is what allows you to develop a foundation, a safe place to attach your suckers and from which you can look at all your other attachments and cut them loose, cut them loose.

The pleasures that you used to get out of sensuality: You begin to see their drawbacks, and the realization of the drawbacks is not threatening or disorienting because you've got a better place to keep the mind. As Ajaan Lee once said, you can't make the mind zero until you've made it one. You've got to make it one in the concentration: firmly established in mindfulness, very clear about what's going on, not shaken by anything that arises or passes away—so that when things do arise and pass away, you can see right through them. You've developed that layer of plaster on the wall so that nothing can get a toehold anymore.

The whole point of this is to get you really attached to one thing and then, when you let go of that final attachment, there's no other place the mind can latch onto. The Buddha is intentionally trying to get you cornered here in concentration, so that when you finally do let go of that, the mind's not going to fall back to its old ways. The corner's going to open up into freedom.

So the grunt work of meditation, just letting go of distractions and bringing the mind back and trying to stick with it: This is important work we're doing here. It's good to know that ultimately there will come a point where you don't have to keep on working—but you also have to realize that you're not going to get there without doing the grunt work.

When they talk about the path and the goal being the same, the most fruitful way of understanding that is to realize that you're not sitting here in a car going down the path and looking ahead to see when the goal's going to show up. You'll see the goal by looking carefully at the path you're following, where you are right now, each step along the way. So pay all your attention right here, to what you have to be doing right here. That's where all the important and valuable things will appear.

Accepting the Buddha's Standards

February 10, 2010

When you come to the meditation, you should come with an attitude of respect because you're doing something important here. You're trying to master a necessary skill, a skill with standards that the Buddha set very high. You want to have respect for that fact.

People talk a lot about developing acceptance in the practice, but the main thing you have to accept is that you're constantly acting on intentions. The way you experience things is shaped by your intentions. And those intentions can be skillful or not. You have to accept the fact that you've been developing a lot of unskillful habits of intention over time, and it's very easy to justify those unskillful habits to yourself.

Our culture provides lots of justifications for them. As Ajaan Mun once said, the society of ordinary people is a culture of defilement: greed, anger, and delusion along with their justifications. People say, "If we didn't have greed, society wouldn't develop. The economy would collapse. If we didn't have anger, we couldn't bring about justice. We couldn't stand up for our rights." And even though there's no conscious defense of delusion, people are constantly defending the idea that we need a little bit of alcohol or, say, a little bit of playing around, so as to get away from our miseries, away from our suffering.

There's a lot of denial going on. People learn to live with denial as an ordinary part of everyday life. The fact that we're growing ill, aging, that we're all going to die: Society is in huge denial around this. We tend to pick up these habits from our upbringing, from the media, from everything around us. So when we sit down to meditate, all of a sudden we find ourselves face-to-face with greed, aversion, and delusion. Part of us likes to defend these things, saying that they're okay, that we have to accept them as a necessary part of life. But skillful acceptance means accepting the fact that you're creating suffering for yourself and other people when you give in to these traits. So you have to be very careful, very alert, very vigilant as you practice.

This is why the Buddha's last words were to bring about completion through heedfulness. "Completion" here means developing the factors of the path to their full power. "Heedful" means that we have to be alert to the

dangers that come when our practice is not yet complete. So we're not just playing around here. We're doing something serious—but not grim. One of the things you notice about the great ajaans when you meet them is that they all have a good sense of humor. After all, one of the best ways of dealing with your defilements is learning how to laugh at them—and to laugh at yourself when you're not up to standard.

And there *are* standards. You want the mind to stay with the breath. You want to evaluate and adjust the breath, keep your attention focused on the breath until it gives rise to a sense of ease and fullness. Only when the mind is settled like this is it going to see anything clearly.

Yesterday I read somebody complaining that they had seen a passage where someone had said that jhana is necessary for awakening, and he said, "No, that can't be the case. My teacher says you see your defilements most clearly when they're really strong: strong lust, strong anger. That's when you're going to gain awakening." That's what he said, but where are you in relation to that anger, where are you in relation to that lust when you've allowed these things to grow strong? When they stir up the mind, you can't see things clearly. There has to be at least part of the mind that's standing very still and watching whatever is happening, not the least bit stirred by those things. Otherwise you just slip along with them, accepting this as the normal way of the mind. But it doesn't have to be that way. Part of the practice is learning that the mind at normalcy is not affected by those things. It's a mind that's been trained in line with the Buddha's standards.

Those standards are set out in the factors of the path, and you want to have respect for that fact. We're not here just to meditate as we please. We have to check ourselves to see if there's anything we're doing that's causing stress, anything causing harm to ourselves or to people around us. You want to check for that. As you learn through observing the precepts to cause less and less harm, your focus moves to more subtle levels of stress in the mind, learning how to drop whatever it is that you're doing to cause them, until finally you come to the subtlest disturbances, caused by the concentration itself. In each case, you want to accept, one, that the stress is actually happening, and, two, that it's coming from something you're doing: a perception you're holding on to, an attitude you're identifying with. That's what you have to learn how to accept.

This requires having a mature attitude toward your own weak points, a

mature attitude toward the areas where you're still lacking. Being mature means learning, on the one hand, not to beat yourself up over these things, but on the other hand, learning how not to just say, "That's okay. It doesn't really matter." Mature acceptance means accepting responsibility and accepting that these habits are deeply worn ruts in the mind. It's going to take time to learn to overcome them, but you do want to overcome them.

Because it's also good to accept the fact that there is something better in life. After all, the four noble truths don't point just to suffering and the cause of suffering. They also point to the path and to the cessation of suffering. Those things can be a part of life, too.

Now, a lot of people wouldn't want to be bothered, but again, that's their choice, and we should be allowed ours. Ajaan Fuang talks about the devas that get bothered by our practice, afraid that we'll go past them. But it's not just devas. There are human beings out there who don't like the idea that there really is a deathless, and that it really is attainable through human effort. They don't like to think about the challenge that poses. They prefer to think that it's not really true, and the Buddha was simply teaching us how to accept things as they are and be perfectly okay with them. Because otherwise, there's a path to follow and there's effort that has to be put forth. You have to be disciplined. A lot of people don't like to hear this. They don't want to accept that. Their idea of acceptance is very lazy and narrow.

But if you can accept the fact that there really is a deathless—that there's a dimension free of suffering, a dimension outside of space and time, and it can be reached, it can be touched through human effort—that's learning how to accept your potential. You want to learn how to accept the demands of your potential. Nobody's forcing you to do this, but if you want to make the most of your potential, this is what you've got to do. All of the Buddha's "shoulds" are conditional. He never forced anybody to do anything. But he said if you want to attain a state of peace, this is what you should do. This is what you have to do. It's required by the principle of cause and effect.

So have respect for this fact. Have respect for your own potential, respect for your desire for true happiness, and accept the fact that, Yes, it is a long path. The people for whom the path is short have already gone to the end of the path. You read the stories about all the people the Buddha taught in his time. It was as if he was picking the flowers in a field full of flowers, selecting just those that were ready to bloom, and leaving the rest behind to bloom later.

We're the late bloomers. Who knows where we were at the time, hiding out under a rock someplace. You might say he picked all the fruit that was already ripe, and now we're gradually ripening ourselves.

So it may take time, it may take effort, dedication, discipline: all those virtues that tend to get short shrift in our society. But we're not here as consumers, which is apparently what our society would like us to be. We're here to make something of our potential to find true happiness, not the happiness they want us to buy. We have to discipline ourselves because that's what's required, to have respect for that fact and accept whatever comes along as part of the training. Whatever the training requires, try to be up for it.

This is the right effort that really constitutes the middle way: in other words, appropriate effort, appropriate for whatever the occasion, whatever the defilement coming up in the present, and whatever your state of mind. Sometimes this requires very delicate work, very refined, very easy. Sometimes it's hard and takes a lot of effort. You have to sit through a good amount of pain and struggle over some of your defilements. The struggle comes from the fact that the defilements aren't all obviously bad. They have their appealing side. They have their hooks. They're sticky, like Velcro. So there's going to be a struggle, back-and-forth. Learn how to accept that as well.

Because when you do it, ultimately you get to the point where the mind doesn't need acceptance or rejection. That's one of the qualities in arahants. An arahant's mind is beyond acceptance, beyond rejection. But to get there, you have to learn how to distinguish what really needs to be accepted, what really needs to be rejected, and bring the proper amount of respect so that you do it right. Bring your practice up to standard. Don't try to pull the Buddha's standards down to your level. Try to pull yourself up to his.

Love Me, Love My Defilements

May 3, 2010

A concept that many modern people find very hard to accept is that their minds have defilements. They think that their minds are perfectly fine, with nothing dirty or defiling in them. People can be especially sensitive about this issue because they grew up with the idea of original sin, that they were somehow inherently bad through no fault of their own, and now they've heard that Buddhism teaches that we're inherently good, that we all have Buddha nature. This is why they come to Buddhism, so they don't want to hear about defilement. They want to hear about their inherently pure Buddha nature.

Well, one, even though there are types of Buddhism that teach about Buddha nature, the Buddha himself never said anything about it. In fact, he never talked about the innate nature of the mind at all. And two, the fact that the mind has defilements doesn't mean that we're necessarily good or bad or anything. It's just a recognition that some states of mind obscure our awareness. They obscure the clarity, the brightness that can be found in the mind.

The problem is that we tend to identify with a lot of them. We identify ourselves with our greed, our aversion, our delusions. We identify with our defilements, but we don't like to recognize them as such. We speak of them in other ways. "This is my identity," we say. "This is my inner nature, my background; this is the way I've been brought up; this is how I've learned how to function in the world." These are the attitudes people have. There's a passage in one of Ajaan Maha Boowa's Dhamma talks where he's saying to the monks, "Suppose the Buddha were able to see your defilements. Don't you think he'd be disgusted?" I've heard people react to that, saying that the Buddha wouldn't be disgusted with us. The Buddha would love us; he would be compassionate toward us. To say that is really to define yourself very intensely with your defilements. Our attitude is, "Love me, love my defilements."

But it's because the Buddha has compassion for us that he points out that the mind has defilements and that they can be removed. That's the important point: The fact that there's a defilement doesn't mean there's a permanent stain on the mind. It's not like grape juice or blood stains you can't wash out. But

always recognize that these things do cause suffering, and they certainly do obscure the mind. If we want real peace and happiness, we really have to let them go.

It's useful to see these things not as *things* in the mind but as *actions,* as habits. Greed is an habitual action. So is anger; so is delusion. These are the ways we deal with the world, react to the world, shape the world. And we've gotten some results through them, which is why we tend to hold onto them, to keep falling back on them. These are part of our repertoire of tools. But they're pretty shoddy tools and they do a very crude and clumsy job.

I mean, you read about human history and you see in each generation that there were so many good things that could have been done that weren't done because of people's greed, anger, and delusion. It's amazing that the human race has gotten as far as it has. Some people think that it's because of greed that we have progress. But you see what happens when greed gets unbridled. The economy turns into a huge casino, and the things that could be done with the wealth of the country just get frittered away.

The same with anger. Think of all the money that's spent for armies, munitions; all the intelligence devoted to creating weapons to kill instead of being devoted to solve the genuine problems in life. It's all a waste. Again, it's amazing that the human race has gotten as far as it has.

Delusion is even worse. It prevents us from seeing the harm caused by these qualities in the mind. A case in point is when we look back at our upbringing. We come to Buddhism from other traditions—Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism—and a lot of attitudes get buried deep in the mind from these traditions. Or we may be coming from a modern, Western, scientific attitude, a materialist attitude. And something deep down inside us insists that Buddhism bend itself in order to meet what we think is right or wrong. Or we feel that we're abandoning our identity, we're abandoning our background, our family, if we adopt Buddhist beliefs.

All of that is thinking of our identity as a thing that can't really be changed. And this is precisely where the Buddha says No. Your identity is made up of clinging-aggregates. The clinging itself is an action. The aggregates are actions. Each of the aggregates is defined by an activity. Form de-forms—in other words it keeps changing. Feelings feel, perceptions perceive, fabrications fabricate the other aggregates into actual aggregates, and consciousness cognizes. These things are defined by their activity. And these

activities are the raw materials from which we create our sense of self.

In our delusion we tend to think of "self" as a thing we're stuck with, either for metaphysical reasons or for social reasons. But that's not the case. Selfing is something we *do.* We pick up habits from our environment. We pick up ideas from our environment, largely in the course of our quest for happiness, our quest for pleasure. We find that certain things are under our control and there are certain things that we want, and we define ourselves around the "we" that controls and the "we" that wants or wants to experience certain things. These are called self as producer and self as consumer. And each of us, even though we may have been brought up in the same environment as our siblings, find that we have very different senses of who we are, who they are. So it's not the case that we're irrevocably formed by our environment. It's through our interaction with our environment that we create our sense of what's possible, what we can do, what we want, what's worth wanting. Some of that's picked up willy-nilly from the outside but a lot of it's there because we let our greed, aversion, and delusion do the choosing.

If you've ever been a parent, you realize that there's only so much you can force on your child. And yet when we look at ourselves, we feel that our parents had a huge influence this way or that, but actually we were the ones doing a lot of the choosing. So the question is, did we make good choices? If we didn't, we can always change them. When you see the act of identification simply as that, as an act, and your many different identities are different patterns of actions, different strategies, then you can begin to ask yourself: Which of these strategies provide good results and which ones muddy things up? Which of the motivations behind these strategies are clear and clean in the sense that they harm nobody? They don't harm you; they don't harm anybody else. And what kind of pleasures are clear and clean in the sense that they don't get you intoxicated and blinded? If you have a pleasure that you really enjoy and yet it causes harm to other people, you tend to deny the fact that it causes harm. You blind yourself.

This is why it's important to adopt the Buddha's point of view of looking at the mind as a bundle of actions. It's not a thing. It's just lots of different actions, lots of different strategies. Some of them keep the mind obscured, darkened from what it could be. When the Buddha points this out to us, it's not because he wants to criticize us. If he's disgusted with our defilements, it's because he learned how to be disgusted with his own, having a very strong

sense of how long he'd been under their power and giving into them. He had identified himself with them and then came to realize all the damage that was done. So he'd had enough.

You know the word *nibbida*, which we translate as disenchantment. It can also mean disgust. You've been feeding on these things for who knows how long and now you realize that it's just been causing a lot of damage. You thought you were getting good nourishment but that was not the case. So you lose your desire to eat these things any more. The Buddha, in his compassion, sees other people suffering from the same misunderstandings he used to have, and so he shows us that these *are* defilements. They *do* obscure what we could actually see in the mind if we'd only let ourselves let go of them, create better strategies, better habits in the mind so that we wouldn't have to depend on these old clumsy ones. We can fashion better tools so we can throw the old shoddy ones away.

This is an important step in the practice. And an important understanding. We really do benefit when we see our defilements as defilements. They really do defile the mind. But as I said, they don't put a permanent stain on the mind. The Buddha's image is of clouds in front of the sun: They darken it, but the clouds don't have to be there and when they do leave, they don't leave a stain on the sun. It's because he wanted us to see the brightness that's possible when the mind is cleansed of these defilements: That was his compassion.

So learn how to see these things his way. Look at aspects of what you may think of as your self, your identity, the beliefs and other things you picked up from your environment, and ask yourself which ones are obscuring your awareness. You may have a sentimental attachment to some of them, a sense of nostalgia, but you can't let that get in the way of letting them go. You have to realize that they really do a lot of harm in the mind. Only when you recognize that fact can you be free from them, free from that harm. And the fact that some of the defilements are ones that you identify with more than others, that you really hold on tight, doesn't mean that they really are genuinely you or yours. They're simply habits that are more deeply entrenched. They're going to take a longer time to dig up. But the first step is learning how to see them as a problem—that you really would be better off without them. Learn to see your denial of defilement as the primary defilement you've got to let go.

The Kindness of Body Contemplation

January 30, 2013

When we focus on the breath, we're with the body in and of itself. What does that mean, "in and of itself"? The rest of the formula tells us that we're "ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside any greed and distress with reference to the world." In other words, we aren't looking at the body in terms of how it functions in the world. We're simply looking at what it's like to have an experience of a body, both right now and over time.

Like the breath we're focusing on right now: How does the breath feel right now? Where do you feel the breath? Where does the breath flow smoothly? Where does it not flow smoothly? If it's not flowing smoothly, where are the patterns of tension in the body that get in the way? How can you dissolve them? These are things you can explore right here, right now.

But it's all too easy to slip away from the body in and of itself to the body in the world—in other words, what it looks like to other people, what your image of the body is that you're carrying into the world, whether it's strong enough to do the work you want. All these are issues you want to put aside right now. Whether you like your body or don't like your body is not an issue. The issue's just being with the body right here, right now.

So we need tools to cut away these tendencies to go back to our likes and dislikes about the body, our frustration with the body, our pride around the body, whatever the issues are. That's why there are other supplementary meditation themes to go along with the breath.

One of those themes is to contemplate the body in terms of its elements, to realize that it's made of the same elements that everything else out there is made of. It's nothing really special, better or worse than they are. Or you can contemplate the parts of the body, using the list we chanted just now, starting with hair of the head and ending with urine. That list in particular is an important meditation. The beginnings of that meditation are taught to every potential monk, every potential novice. The preceptor is supposed to teach each new candidate the first five items on the list: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin. You're taught to reflect on these back and forth. Think about each part on its own. What would it be like if it were taken out of the body and just placed on the floor all by itself? How would you react to it? If

you walked into the meditation hall here and saw your body parts on the floor, even if they were neatly lined up and labeled, you'd run away.

And when those parts are in the body, what are they with? They're with the blood, the lymph, and all the other things you have in the body that you really don't want to think about. But they're there. And you have to question: Why don't you want to think about these things? If you're looking at a person and have other issues with the person you're looking at, the idea of these things seems to get in the way. Particularly if you're physically attracted to the other person or if you're physically attracted to yourself—or if you're not attracted to yourself, the thought of these things disgusts you. It's interesting that whether you like the body or don't like the body, the cure is the same: look at the body in terms of its 32 parts. If you have pride around your body, you do this contemplation to remind yourself that there's nothing there to be proud of. If you're ashamed of your body, you do this contemplation to remind yourself that everyone else has the same body parts, so there's nothing to be ashamed of. This contemplation is a great equalizer.

How do you do it? You can go through the list, visualizing each of the parts and ask yourself, where are they right now? One common exercise is to start with the bones. Visualize each of the bones as you can remember them, starting with the bones at the tips of your fingers and going up through the hands, the arms, and the shoulders. Then shift to the tips of the toes and go up through the legs, the pelvis, all the bones in the spine up through the neck and the skull. When you do this, you realize that what you have here is the same as what everybody else has. This helps liberate you from the idea that your body is better than other people's bodies or worse than other people's bodies because we all have the same parts, and none of them are worth putting on show.

You can think of the body in terms of the way they eat mangos in the Philippines. You take a knife and first you cut the sides of the mango away from the seed, and then you've got two little boats of mango, each in its skin. Then you cut the flesh crosswise in little squares without cutting the skin, and you can turn it inside out so that the squares of mango separate out and you can eat them without using a spoon. Imagine doing that with your body. Imagine Miss Universe or whoever doing that to her body as part of her walk down the runway. What she has is the same as what you've got. Then reflect on the cosmetic industry and you realize that everything they sell is just to paint this up, to pretend that things like livers and intestines are not there in the body or

to disguise the fact that the body's getting older and older as we speak.

If you're willing to do this practice, you find it's really liberating. You're no longer a slave to the cosmetic industry or all the other facets of the advertising industry that want to make you feel bad about your body so that you'll buy their products to make you feel better about your body. They want you to keep feeding off the fear that your body is not up to snuff, but it's close enough to being beautiful that their products will make the difference. But if you hold no delusions about your body or anyone else's body, you're free.

I'm always amazed at the people who don't like this contemplation, who say it's imposed on them, that it's oppressive or unfair, whatever. It's actually very liberating because it equalizes and strips away the delusions that keep us enslaved. As for whatever negative image comes up in the course of the contemplation, there's a difference between a healthy negative image and an unhealthy negative image of your body. The unhealthy one is when you see your body as deficient in one way or another, and other people's as beautiful. A healthy negative body image is when you see that everybody's equal in having all these parts of the body that are really not all that appealing, really not all that worth holding onto.

This is not meant just to overcome lust. It's also meant to overcome any kind of attachment to the body, realizing that this attachment can cause all kinds of problems, all kinds of suffering. I read recently about a lay teacher who decided that this was a bad kind of contemplation, meant to make women feel inferior, and so she had decided to substitute it with another one, having goodwill for your body and goodwill for any sense of shame around the body. But she'd also noticed that the results of this contemplation were fragile. Every time a new wrinkle appeared, she'd have to go through it all over again. Whereas if you realize that there's really nothing here worth getting all excited about, the appearance of wrinkles is no big deal. Everybody has them. They're just a warning signal that you should accelerate your efforts to do good.

So learn to see this contemplation as really liberating. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about it as one of his main contemplations for gaining insight not only into your ideas about your own body and about everybody else's bodies, but more importantly into the deceptions of perception—and particularly your perception of what's attractive and what's not. The perceptions are what you're after. Why are your perceptions so arbitrary? What's hiding behind the fact that you choose one perception over another—that this is attractive, that's

not attractive? Your perceptions are driven by your greed, aversion, and delusion. And if you can't see that, you'll never be free from your greed, aversion, and delusion because they'll be parading these perceptions in front of you and fooling you all the time.

So this is not a contemplation that bad-mouths the body. It's just focusing on how the mind relates to the body and it puts the mind in a position where it really can be with the body just in and of itself. That way you begin to see other things in and of themselves as well: your feelings, your perceptions, thought fabrications, states of your mind, any qualities that would pull you away from staying with the body here in the present moment or any qualities that would help in that direction. You want to be able to see these things clearly for what they are and while they're happening. The more you're able to step back from either your pride around your body or your shame around your body, the more you realize that neither is a helpful attitude to bring to the practice. When you can step away from these things, you're that much closer to freedom, to finding a happiness that's independent from both the body and the events in your mind.

It's not like we're saying the body is bad and the mind is good. There's something deeper than even the mind that we're after. As the Buddha says, this "something" can be touched by the mind and it's touched and seen at the body. The potential opening to it is always right here in the present moment where the mind and the body meet. Where you have an experience of the body right now: That's where the experience of the deathless will come. As long as the mind has these issues around liking or disliking the body, it's not going to be able to settle into the spot where it can touch and see that other dimension.

So use this contemplation for its intended purpose. It's not to hate the body, or to make you feel ashamed of yourself. It's to free you from the body and from all the attitudes in the mind that get attached to the body and then either like it or dislike it because of the attachment. When you understand this contemplation, you find that it really is very helpful. It's one of the kindest things the Buddha left behind.

Freedom & Responsibility

October 30, 2011

If you go to an allopathic doctor, you get asked certain types of questions about your symptoms, questions that help the doctor figure out where you fall within the doctor's range of expertise. If you go to a homeopathic doctor, you get a different set of questions. If you go to a Chinese doctor, a different set. Ayurvedic, a different set. If you've grown up within any of these systems, the questions in that system will seem most natural to you. They're the sort of things you've learned to observe about yourself. You've learned to internalize the way that system looks at your body and at your disease. Other ways of looking at disease will seem strange.

Of course, the question always is, does that way of looking at your body serve your needs or just the needs of the system? You hear the history of allopathic medicine and how they squeezed out everybody else so they were the only ones who were not labeled as quacks. It helped expose a lot of actual charlatans, but it's also caused us to miss out on a lot of alternatives.

The same applies to psychiatry or psychotherapy. There are cases that would come to an exorcist in Thailand, and the exorcist would immediately say, oh, spirit possession. If the same sort of case came to a psychiatrist here in the States, he'd say, ah, schizophrenia. So which is it? You have to label it so you can cure it, but which label will lead to the most effective way of curing the disease? There's always the question: Are you being best served by these different systems or are you just being treated as more grist for their mill?

This is one of the areas in which the Buddha's teachings are really special. All he teaches, he says, are suffering and the end of suffering. But he doesn't really define suffering that clearly. He gives examples and they're pretty broad: not getting what you want, having to stay with what you don't like, being separated from what you do like. You can interpret these examples in your own language and tailor them to your needs. And the cure he advises is not one that he's going to impose on you. It's one that you have to administer yourself.

This gives you a little bit more confidence. You're not there for the sake of the institution. Of course, there have been Buddhist institutions that have developed around ways of defining your problem for you, like the Tibetan

Book of the Dead or the Chinese Sutra of the Ten Kings, where they tell you you've got to look out for your dead ancestors because at this number of days after their death they're going to go to this court or they're going to go through this stage of the bardo and you've got to pay the monks or the nuns to do the proper chants to make sure your dead loved ones get through the stage. That sort of teaching is obviously there for the sake of the institution. But as for the original teachings, you realize that you're totally free to take them or not. Even the definition of your suffering is something you provide for yourself when you start out. As you practice, you'll find that your sense of what suffering is and how you're going to comprehend it will grow a lot more subtle, but it grows more subtle because you're getting more familiar with it.

So to preserve the Buddha's original intention, it's our responsibility as individuals to take charge of our own practice, our own cure. The Buddha gives pointers as to where to look. You look at where your cravings are, you look at where your ignorance is, you look at where your clingings are, all of which are very difficult things to see—and very difficult things to let go of, especially in the case of the clinging. You have a certain sense of your own identity: the things you like, the things you don't like, the things you're willing to put up with, the things you won't put up with, the things you will look at, and the things you refuse to look at. This can create obstacles to your seeing, and it takes a lot of honesty to overcome those obstacles. It helps to have someone who's been on the path before you to keep you honest.

This is why when the Buddha was teaching Rahula to look at his actions in terms of his intentions, the immediate results, and the long term results, he said that if you notice that you did something that caused harm, go and talk it over with someone who's already on the path so you gain the benefit of that person's insight. When he talked to the Kalamas, telling them not to go simply by what your teacher says or by what the texts say, he also advised them not to go by their own sense of what seems right or wrong. This means that you've got to test things in practice to see which types of actions actually give good results and which ones give bad results. At the same time, he says, you have to take into consideration the opinions of the wise.

So you don't have to reinvent the Dhamma wheel every time you act. You're in a position where you can take advantage of other people's outside perspective, which is a real help because it's a lot easier for other people to see your defilements than it is for you to see your own. For those who have

gone further on the path, it's even easier to see the types of defilements that everybody else in society takes for granted.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha often had his students go to practice in different parts of India away from where they had grown up. The culture would be different and that'd give a different perspective on the things you usually took for granted. I know this was one of the major advantages of my going to Thailand. Some of the values I took for granted and some of the activities and attitudes I took for granted, I suddenly discovered, were questioned over there and viewed with a certain amount of suspicion and skepticism. It was good to have that outside perspective.

But I still had to do the work on my own. This is what Ajaan Fuang meant when he said you have to think like a thief. Don't expect the teacher to hand everything to you. You have to try to figure things out for yourself. That doesn't mean just figuring out what the teachings are but also figuring out where your own defilements are, figuring out how you play tricks on yourself, how you hide things from yourself. You're the joint that has to be cased.

Only if you're willing to take on that responsibility is the training possible. The teacher is here to provide perspective, to help suggest opportunities or approaches you might not have thought of on your own—or that might have occurred to you only after a long time. But the basic work in administering the cure is *your* work. It requires a lot of honesty, a lot of patience: all the qualities that make you a reliable person.

So instead of simply presenting yourself to the doctor and asking for the cure, you start taking charge of your own cure. The role of the teacher is to keep watch so as to notice when you're getting off course. As Ajaan Chah said, he sees people wandering off the right side of the road so he says, "Go left, go left." Other people wander off the left side and he says, "Go right, go right." It's not a matter of simply copying down a few of a teacher's teachings and putting them in a book, taking them as his basic approach to the Dhamma or his basic teaching. The teachings have to be understood in context.

The crucial context is your own sense that you've had enough suffering—however you feel burdened—and that you want to put an end to it. This may take you a lot farther and require a lot more from you than you might have originally imagined. But as you get on the path, you realize that that's where you want to go. Nobody forces you to stay on the path. If you decide at a certain point that you want to wander off path, that's your choice. We're trying

to preserve your freedom all the way through. But with freedom comes responsibility.

What keeps you going is a strong sense that if you don't follow the path, if you don't take care of your own mind, there's going to be suffering—which is not a point that some institution is trying to use to threaten you. It's a fact of life.

They talk in postmodern terms about how everything is determined by language, but pain is not totally determined by language. The way you interpret the pain, the way you understand how it's caused is largely determined by language, but the *fact* of the pain is always there, even prior to language. It's the reality that keeps impinging on whatever ideas we have about ourselves, whatever structures we build for our own self-identity or our idea of where we fit in the world or how the world fits around us. Those ideas may be expressed in language, but they keep running up against pain, which is something beyond language. The goal the Buddha proposes is also something beyond language. He states that one of the things you realize when you come to the end of suffering is that you know how far language goes and you know what goes beyond language.

So it's not just a structure that we're trying to impose on you to keep you in the structure. This is a structure that's more like a fire escape designed to get you out of the structure, and it deals with problems that come prior to the structure. It's not that the disease is defined by the ability of the doctor to treat you. It's defined by your own sense of being burdened and weighed down by something hard to bear.

So keep these points in mind as you practice. The teacher is here to give pointers, to help give perspective, to call you on things you need to notice about your actions. But basically, *you're* the one who has to decide whether you're going to take the teacher's advice. And you're the one who has to decide if you're really serious about putting an end to suffering. There's freedom of choice, but with the freedom comes a lot of responsibility. If you don't take on that responsibility, you won't be able to find the even greater freedom of release.

Choiceful Awareness

July 21, 2012

Sometimes our problem as meditators is that we've read too much, listened to too many explanations about meditation. We know what happens at the end and, given our general impatience, we want to rush right there. We've heard about all the wonderful things that happen when you gain discernment and insight arises, and so we want to be right there, right now, without building the foundation, without mastering the skills that are needed for that insight really to have an impact on the mind, to have the really desired effect—which is to train the mind not to create suffering for itself.

So remember that what we're developing here is a skill, and the skill has to go through very basic steps. Don't think that you're too advanced for those basics. They're basic not because they're simple but because they're important, like the basic principle of kamma: that our lives are being shaped by the choices we make. We'd rather go straight to choiceless awareness, where everything is already okay and nothing has to be done. Now, it is true that at the moment of awakening the mind is not making choices; it has finally arrived at a spot where, in not making any choice, it opens to the deathless. But to get to that point you first have to master choiceful awareness—in other words, being very clear about the choices you're making, and trying to do them skillfully.

For instance, right now you could be staying with the breath or you could be focusing on something else. You could be breathing in one way or you could be breathing in another. You could be perceiving the breath simply as the air coming in and out of the nose or you could be perceiving it as a kind of energy. You could perceive that energy as flowing or as still. There are lots of choices, and the fact is we're making a lot of decisions all the time. The problem is that many of those decisions are being made on default mode so that we're hardly aware of them. As a result, when you think you're practicing choiceless awareness, what's actually happening is that you're closing your eyes to the choices you're making.

Years back, there was the story of a monk who had gone to Ajaan Maha Boowa's monastery and declared to some of the junior monks there that he had no doubts about the Buddha's teachings—which in the vocabulary of the monastery was a declaration of stream entry. So someone reported this to

Ajaan Maha Boowa, and Ajaan Maha Boowa put his hands over his eyes and said, "I have no doubts. I have no doubts about anything I see." Of course, you don't see anything with your hands over your eyes. The point he was making is that the monk was really not paying much attention. There's a lot to doubt; there's a lot to question yourself about in the practice. And this is not a matter of unskillful doubt. There are lots of things you can have skillful questions about. You want to explore.

This especially applies to your choices. Too often we think we're not making choices and yet it's simply because the choices have gone underground. One of the purposes of meditation is to bring those choices up into the light of day so you can see them and learn how to make them more skillful. In fact, by making them more skillful, you get more and more sensitive to the choices that are being made on even subtler levels.

So for the time being, choose to stay with the breath. If you find the mind wandering off, choose to come back to the breath again. And if it feels like a lot of effort is being put into focusing on the breath, well, choose to make that effort. It's in setting up this sort of intention that you give something for all your other intentions to bounce off of. That's how you become sensitive to them. If the mind seems to be totally placid, accepting everything that comes along, give it this choice to stay with the breath and see how accepting it is. If it's not accepting of this choice, you've got a problem. When you recognize that the problem is something you need to solve, you can begin to dig up some of the issues in the mind that you haven't been sensitive to before. You can realize how the mind was making all of these other choices and it liked wandering around or allowing thoughts to come in without any resistance. It seemed to be making no choices because none of its choices were being challenged.

So here you're challenging those choices with the breath. Notice how you're breathing. Explore what kind of breathing feels good right now because that's an area where you can exercise some skillful choices. Notice how you think about the breath. Notice how you evaluate the breath. Those are ways in which you make choices as well.

Decide whether you like this kind of breathing or not. If you find something you like, stick with it to test for yourself whether you made a good choice. If it feels good for a while, that's okay. Choose to stick with it. If after a while it doesn't feel good anymore, you can choose to change. It's through exercising your powers of choice that you become more sensitive to how they function

and to the impact that they have. That enables you to get better and better at making good choices.

For example, you can focus on the way you perceive the breath. When the breath comes in, where do you think of it coming in? From which directions does it come in? You might want to explore first to see what those directions already are before you decide to make changes. Sometimes, when you breathe in, some parts of the body are getting their breath energy from the front and others are getting breath energy from the back. Some parts have the breath energy coming down from the top of the head; others have breath energy coming up from the soles of the feet. These energies may be harmonious or may be in conflict. This is something you can explore.

Then you try to figure out how to resolve some of those conflicts. How do you breathe and how do you hold a perception of the breath in mind that allows things to work together, so that when the breath energy comes in, the whole body feels like it's being nourished, with no sense of conflict? As you stay with the breath, you begin to notice that the breath energy in some parts of the body is moving, while in other parts of the body it's still. Now, it can be still either because those parts of the body are being depleted or starved of breath energy, or because they're full. They don't need any more energy. Ajaan Fuang's image is of a big jar of water. In Thailand, when they collect rainwater, they use enormous earthenware jars. As long as the jar is empty, you can put more water in, put more in, put more in, but you get to a point where it's full and no matter how much more water you put in, the water in the jar is just going to stay as it was. You can't make it even more full than that. Any excess water just overflows.

The same with the breath: It's usually a good idea to try to breathe in an energetic way as you begin meditating, and to think of the moving breath energy going through all parts of the body, waking up the different elements, waking up the different parts of the body, energizing them until you gain a sense that the breath energy is full and that trying to push more energy into a particular part of the body is actually unpleasant. That's a sign you've got a section of the body that should be left alone and allowed to stay still. The sense of stillness that's full: That's what you allow to spread at the next stage.

There's a Dhamma talk where Ajaan Lee mentions that you don't want to spread the moving energy around. He's talking about this second stage, where there's just a sense of fullness, stillness, lightness, pleasure. Sometimes,

paradoxically, the fullness feels empty, but there's a sense that it feels really good. You allow it to spread around. Let it spread through the body and allow all the still-energy areas to connect up. The breath will then get a lot more refined. You can pursue this to the point where everything grows totally still. Your thoughts are still; the breath is still; the body feels filled with still breath energy; the mind feels no need to go thinking about anything else.

Of course, deep down inside, it's still making choices, choosing subtly to stay right here, stay right here, to maintain what you've got. But a lot of other choices just fall away. You're not interested in getting involved with other things, and when other choices or intentions do come up, you see them very clearly: how they form at the frontier area where they're not clearly mental or physical. There's a kind of stirring, and you can just leave it as a stirring in the breath energy, or the mind could slap a perception or label on it and turn it into a thought and go running with it. But as you're staying right here, you realize that you're right at the point where that kind of decision is being made. For the time being, you can decide: no thoughts, no thoughts.

When little eddies of breath energy threaten to turn into nodules, allow them to dissolve away. You don't want to explore their content because first you want to get really, really skilled at knowing what the mind is like when a very minimal level of fabrication or choice is going on. That's so you get more and more sensitive to choices when they happen.

This is how you approach the advanced level of meditation where the mind is making fewer and fewer choices after first choosing to be very sensitive to *how* you're making the choices and what the results are. You're practicing choiceful awareness: learning how the mind chooses to be still and chooses various ways of breathing and perceiving the breath and perceiving any distractions that may come up in such a way that you can maintain this stillness. If you're going to be thinking about inconstancy, stress, or not-self— *anicca, dukkha, anatta*—focus that analysis on the distractions so that you can quickly let them dissolve. Allow your concentration and awareness of the breath to be as constant and pleasurable and as much under control as possible. It's in exercising these choices that you get really, really sensitive to what's going on.

That way, when the moment arrives where there's a genuine lack of choice, you're poised right at the threshold of something really important. It's because you've developed this sensitivity to choice that you can detect even the slightest glimmerings of choice that may come up in the mind. That's how you

let them go. Without having developed this sensitivity, you won't see them. If you don't see them, there's no way you can let them go.

So don't be in too great a hurry to get to the end point. What you should be focusing on right now is making sure you've got the basic choices down pat, over and over and over again. This requires patience. Everybody, of course, would like to go straight to the end but you can't go to the end until you've gotten really sensitive about the basics: the choice to keep coming back to the breath and to choose skillful ways of breathing. Those are the choices that will open things up inside. The path may not progress as quickly as you'd like, but it does progress. It gets you there. Otherwise, if you try to force yourself straight to the end, you end up falling off and going nowhere at all.

The Truth of Transcendence

October 27, 2010

Years back, a friend of my brother found out that I was a Buddhist monk and so he decided to get a present for my niece. It was a little box, called *Buddha in a Box*. It had a little plasticine Buddha and a little booklet on the Buddha's teachings, which told of how the Buddha awakened to four wonderful truths: loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. [Pause.] There's no laughter. [Laughter.] You think that's what the Buddha awakened to? Those four wonderful truths? [More laughter.] I had to sit my niece down and explain things to her.

More recently I read someone saying the Buddha awakened to four noble truths about life, and that was it. In other words, he didn't awaken to anything transcendent, he didn't really put an end to suffering, didn't find anything unconditioned. He just found that there were four, again, wonderful truths about life. And that's not true either. Part of his awakening was discovering the four noble truths, but he also discovered there were tasks appropriate to them. There were skills that you developed around the truths, each truth requiring a specific skill: Suffering is to be comprehended; the cause of suffering, craving, is something you want to learn how to abandon; the cessation of suffering is something you want to realize, and the path to that cessation—which involves dispassion for the craving—is something you want to develop.

But the Buddha didn't stop there. Remember, the Dhamma wheel has twelve spokes and so far we only have eight. The remaining four spokes were realizing that he'd completed the duties with regard to all four truths, and it was the completion of those duties that led to something beyond the four noble truths. After all, the truths are part of the path and the path does go someplace. If the Buddha didn't have a goal, he wouldn't have used the image of the path. There is a total end of suffering; there is a total release and it's totally unconditioned.

Another teacher I was reading said that release is something conditioned. She cited a text in the Canon where the Buddha starts out with dependent co-arising up through suffering and then from suffering talks about how suffering gives rise to conviction and conviction gives rise to effort and joy, concentration, discernment, all the way up to release. So her conclusion was

that release, too, is caused; therefore, she said, nibbana is also a conditioned phenomenon—it comes and goes—and she claimed to be able to dip into nibbana whenever she wanted to, with the mature realization that it wasn't going to last. She presented this as if it were good news.

Again this is missing the whole image of the path. The path is something conditioned but it can lead to something unconditioned. It's like gaining release from prison. You have to go through certain processes—all the paperwork, all the requirements that you have to fulfill in order to get out of prison. But those processes don't create the freedom you find outside. That's something independent of the paperwork, the bureaucratic hassles. The paperwork gets you there, but the freedom isn't caused by the paperwork.

In the same way, there is something unconditioned. That point has to be repeated over and over again, because for some reason there are people who don't like the idea, whether it's because it makes them feel inferior or that there's a demand placed on them: "There's somebody out there who's attained freedom, whereas I haven't attained freedom and therefore there's something wrong with me and I don't want to feel like there's something wrong with me so let's not even think about it." And that's just setting the bar so low that there's no such thing as accomplishment, no such thing as attainment, which is not a gift in any way at all.

But the path was the Buddha's gift to other people: He found the path to totally unconditioned freedom and he was able to teach it. He showed the way. As in the Thai word *naenam: Nae* - he was able to advise; and *nam* - he was able to lead you there, show you the path, show you by example that this was possible.

So even though the issue of an unconditioned freedom may not be your immediate problem right now as you're meditating, if there were no freedom, it would be a big problem. It would shut the door on any hope of a total release from suffering. We'd be stuck here—and how that could be good news, I have no idea. The real good news is that there is an unconditioned. And, through your efforts and through your desires and through your attempts to achieve mastery, it can be attained. There is an end to the work we're doing here.

So don't confuse the path with the goal. The path is one thing; the goal is something else. And part of the path is understanding the four noble truths and learning how to use them. That much is true, but it's not the end. We want to learn how to see things in terms of the four noble truths so that we can apply

the duties and master the skills.

Now, this is a very special way of seeing things. It doesn't come automatically. In some of the texts, the Buddha starts right out with the four noble truths, but in others he has to work up to them. Basically, he starts out with what's called mundane right view, which essentially is belief in the principle of kamma, your actions: that your actions really do make a difference, that the quality of your intentions really does determine the quality of the results. There are good and bad actions leading to good and bad results. A lot of us resist this teaching because as soon as we think about our past actions having results, we think about all the bad things we did and say, "Oops, they're going to come and get me."

But that's not how the Buddha introduced the topic of kamma. When he was talking about mundane right view or the principle of kamma, he'd start out with generosity and gratitude. The phrasing is, "There is what is given, there is what is sacrificed, there is what is offered." It sounds strange, but he's basically pointing out that giving does constitute a meritorious act, and for two reasons. One, you do have choices—and this is probably the essential part of the Buddha's teachings on kamma, on action: that you have choices, that things are not determined totally by the past. The results of past actions are going to crop up, but given the range of things that can crop up, you have choices in any one moment as to whether you're going to shape those experiences in a skillful or unskillful way. So when you give something, it's because you've made a choice. You weren't forced to give.

The second reason for why giving is meritorious is because the action of giving does have results. It does lead to positive states of mind, positive conditions that have real value because people have value. People have value because they can make choices.

As for gratitude, the Buddha starts out by saying, "There is mother and father." This was in opposition to a belief that you didn't have any real debt to your parents because, in giving birth to you and raising you, they just were acting under totally predetermined forces, so they had no choice in the matter. You came out, and that's it. It was just a mechanical or a biological process.

But once you realize that your parents had choices—they had the choice to give birth to you, they had the choice to let you live, and in many cases they taught you how to speak, how to walk, raised you—you have a huge debt to them. Even if they didn't raise you, even if they abandoned you at birth to be

adopted by somebody else, at least they gave you the body you have. They didn't abort the pregnancy. So there's a debt to them, a debt of gratitude—*gratitude* here meaning an appreciation of the goodness that other people have done for you, the fact that the happiness you have depends on the skillful choices that other people have made.

There's a debt that goes along with that. And there's a lesson as well: that we depend on the goodness of others and the hard choices that some people have to make. If we want goodness to continue in the world, we're going to have to learn to make hard choices as well. We can't just assume that whatever comes easy is okay. Sometimes you have to make the hard choice to go out of your way to do something you know is really good, really helpful, even though it requires sacrifices.

So that's how the Buddha introduced his teaching on kamma, on action: There is goodness in the world because people can choose.

Then from those principles he'd give what was called a graduated teaching or a gradual teaching. He'd go through various topics starting with generosity and virtue and then the rewards that come from generosity and virtue. He'd talk about heaven, which is another part of the teaching on kamma: There is a life after this one, and the actions we do in this lifetime bear results now and on into the future. If the actions are good, they can open the way to heaven. But heaven isn't permanent. You have some good times up there, sporting with your fellow devas, and then you have to fall again—and when you fall, you fall hard. There were a couple of people I knew in Thailand who were constantly dissatisfied. You could never do enough for them. And Ajaan Fuang made a comment about them once, saying that they were devas in a previous lifetime and they don't like being human beings again, because it's a lot harder and a lot less fun.

So there's a danger, there are drawbacks to even the good rewards that you would gain from generosity and virtue as you wander through various states of being and becoming. It was after coming to these drawbacks that the Buddha would talk about the rewards of renunciation, looking for a higher happiness, trading in the happiness that comes from generosity and virtue for the sake of a happiness that's more lasting, that comes with giving up your desire for sensual pleasures and looking for something deeper inside, more lasting inside.

Once you'd seen the rewards of renunciation, you'd be ready for the four noble truths, which require a willingness to turn around and look, even when

things are going well, to remind yourself that these things that are going well are not going to go well forever and is that really satisfactory? There's always going to be a hitch; there's always going to be something impermanent. There's always stress even in the pleasure.

The second noble truth teaches that the cause for that stress comes from the craving that tends to go along with the pleasure. So you want to look for that and to develop the qualities of mind that can see that craving and develop dispassion for it. This is why we develop all the different factors of the path, why we're sitting here concentrating right now, trying to be mindful, trying to get the mind centered: so it can find a pleasure that lies above the sensual pleasure. As the Buddha said, it's only if you find this pleasure that comes from stillness that the mind can get a better perspective on its sensual desires and genuinely let them go.

So here you are, cultivating the desire for a higher pleasure—which is perfectly fine. It's part of right effort.

There was another thing I read recently, where a teacher said he was writing with the purpose of getting people to get rid of their craving for awakening. That's really destructive. The Buddha said that the desire for awakening, the desire to be skillful, to bring skillfulness to fruition, is part of the path. As Ven. Ananda said, the craving to gain awakening is something that's necessary for the practice. So we're working on this desire to create a better state of mind, a more solid state of mind, both because it gives a higher pleasure and because it puts the mind in a better position to see its movements —to see exactly where is that movement of craving. What does it look like? How do you recognize it? Where is the stress? There are stresses that are simply part of the fact that things arise and pass away, but then there's the stress that comes from craving. It's a different kind of stress. It's the one that really causes the suffering that digs deep into the mind. But it's the one you can really do something about.

So this is how you prepare the mind to start using the four noble truths and developing the skills around them so that at some point you will have the skills fully mastered. That's when you've got a complete Dhamma wheel in your heart. And that's when even the truths get put aside. Remember the Buddha's image of the raft. The four noble truths are part of the raft. You don't carry them around after you've gotten to the other shore, but while you're crossing the river you don't want to let them go. If you let go of the raft while you're

still crossing over, you just get swept down the river—and going with the flow of the river doesn't lead you to good places. In the Buddha's image, you're swept to monsters, whirlpools, crocodiles, and other beasts down the river.

So we hold onto the raft to get across, which means holding onto the path, onto all the factors of the path. But it's always good to have in the back of your mind the conviction that this will lead to a dimension of true freedom—total, ultimate—where you won't need to hold onto anything. This conviction is something that can be tested, that can actually be verified in this lifetime. And that's a wonderful truth.

Loss

April 19, 2010

One of the things you notice as you practice is how many selves you have. Often you have more than you notice. For every desire you take on, there's going to be the sense of what you can do to bring that desire about, what powers you have under your control, and then the sense of you as the person who's going to experience the happiness that will come when the desire is fulfilled. As the Buddha said, this desire or craving is the water that nourishes our sense of self. It's what provides the location around which each sense of self develops. That holds true for every desire we have. Sometimes we have a desire for food, sometimes for shelter, for friends, for relationships, for all kinds of things. And we have a sense of self for each of those desires.

Especially when we suffer loss of someone or something we thought we had—something we did have for a while but wasn't really as much ours as we thought it was: It's not just the loss of that thing or that relationship. There's a strong sense that we've lost part of ourself, one of our selves.

This is very central to the Buddha's teachings on suffering. It's one of the main causes for suffering. And it goes deep. Once King Pasenadi was talking to the Buddha and one of the aides from the palace came to him and whispered in his ear, saying that Queen Mallika had just died. The King broke down and cried, so the Buddha said to him, "Did you ever think that she would live forever? How can we have it in this world, that the things and people we love don't pass away?"

But then he goes on to say to the king, "As long as you feel that there's a value in giving expression to your grief, go ahead. But there will come a point when you realize it's self-indulgence. At that point," he added, "you have to realize that there are other desires, other duties you have in life and you can't abandon those just to keep on giving expression to your grief." In other words, there are other parts of yourself or other selves that have to keep functioning.

That's where his first comment comes in: to remind the king that loss is not happening just to him. It's universal. This is one of the bizarre things about grief. You would think that thinking of the grief experienced by everybody in the world would make your own grief even heavier, but it doesn't. It actually takes a lot of the sting out as you realize, "It's not just me. This is built into the

way things are.”

The reflection we often recite—“I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me”: That’s actually only part of the reflection given in the Canon. That part of the reflection is for the purpose of inspiring a sense of heedfulness, reminding you that you have to be skillful in what you do and in the desires you foster, choosing which ones to foster and which ones to put aside so as not to put yourself in danger.

But then the Buddha encourages you to go on and remind yourself that it’s not just you, it’s everyone: man, woman, and child; layperson and ordained; now, in the past, and in the future. Everyone is going to grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to them. As the Buddha said, that inspires in you a different motivation, the motivation to get on the path.

In other words, you develop a new self, a self that really does want to find a way out of all this turmoil, all this repeated, repeated suffering. The emotion here is *samvega,* the sense of terror over unending rebirth and redeath, and a sense of urgency in finding a way out.

In another context, he calls this sense of urgency “renunciate grief” as opposed to householder grief. Householder grief is when you don’t get what you want in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. That sounds pretty abstract but it actually includes all our relationships and dealings with the world as a whole. After all, that’s what the world is: the range of experience through the six senses. And the skillful cure for that grief, the Buddha says, is not trying to find householder happiness in the senses. It’s to conceive a different kind of desire, the desire to find a true happiness inside that’s not going to leave you, that’s not going to change. The realization that you haven’t got there yet: He calls that renunciate grief.

Now, renunciate grief is good because it’s what gets you on the path. Trying to find an escape from householder grief by searching for householder joy ends up in nothing but repeated disappointment. If you gain a little householder joy, its causes will have to change, and then you’re back with householder grief again. What you want is a dependable joy, which is what renunciate joy can provide. But the quest for renunciate joy starts with renunciate grief, realizing that there is a goal that can be attained and you haven’t gotten there yet. That grief has to be encouraged and accompanied by *pasada:* confidence that there is a way out, that you can find that way out, and that you have what it takes to go all the way.

In other words, you take the conceit that lies at the center of grief and you point it in a new direction. There's a story where Ven. Sariputta's talking about how he'd reflected one day after meditating, "Is there anything in the world that, in changing, would cause grief to arise in my mind?" And the response was No, there's nothing. Ven. Ananda, who was listening in, immediately asked, " Well, what if the Buddha passed away? Wouldn't you feel grief then?" Sariputta said No, he'd reflect that it's a sad thing that someone who was so useful for the world had to pass away, but it wouldn't cause any disturbance in his mind. And Ananda's reaction was interesting. He said, "Ah, it's a sign that you have no more conceit." Because that, essentially, is what the grief is: It's a wound to your sense of self or one of your senses of self.

But the cure is not to abandon conceit entirely. You can't do that right away, for you'd have no sense of self to support your practice. So you turn your conceit into renunciate conceit: reflecting that other people have found a way out, and many of them started out in situations worse than yours in terms of their strengths, their weaknesses, their inner and outer qualities, but they were able to find their way out. They could do it, so can you.

You take that conceit and you put it to a good purpose. You create another sense of self, a sense of self that aims at true happiness. This is a sense of self you want to encourage and nourish. You develop a sense of responsibility, a sense of confidence and purpose. You can begin to marshal all your different senses of self in this direction because it's not the case that once you're on the path you'll have only one desire. We live in a world, we have to deal with people, we have to deal with situations, we've got bodies we have to care for, we're social animals, so there are going to be other desires as well. But you have to learn how to marshal them. And really look at them: Which desires are pulling you away from true happiness and which ones are actually helpful or at the very least not obstacles on the path?

That right there involves a kind of shedding: shedding the desires that pull you away and shedding the selves that go along with them. This is why it's sometimes very difficult because we have a strong identification with certain desires, certain aspirations, certain aims. You have to reflect: If we don't let go of these things now, no matter how much we like them, no matter how intimate they are, if we don't let go of them now while we're focused and mindful, the day will come when they'll be pulled away from us when we're in

no shape to let go of them at all. It's going to be as if part of you has been ripped out of you.

So you reflect on the fact that everybody has to do this. It's not just you. And that allows you to look at the whole issue of where you're looking for happiness from a broader perspective. The broader perspective helps to take a lot of the sting away.

Wherever there's loss in life, you have to reflect that the important things have not been lost. The story of Ananda and Sariputta continued, and it turned out that Sariputta ended up dying before the Buddha. For some reason, there's a Mahayana version of the story in which the Buddha says he lost his sense of the directions, he was so upset that he'd lost Sariputta and Moggallana. But that's really an insult to the Buddha. It's pandering to people's ideas of the importance of their emotions to slander and betray the Buddha in that way.

The actual story is that Ananda was the one who was upset when he heard of Sariputta's death. He went to see the Buddha and complained that he had lost his sense of the directions when he learned that Sariputta had died. And the Buddha said, "Well, did Sariputta take virtue away with him? Did he take concentration away? Did he take discernment away? Did he take release away?" No, all the important things in life were still there. The important possibilities, the important opportunities were still there. And the Buddha continued, "Did I ever tell you that anything born will never leave you? Things that are born, things that age, things that grow ill: Do you think they'll never leave you?" And Ananda had to say No.

But there is one thing in life that will never leave you, and that's release. I've told you many times that story of Ajaan Suwat, but it bears retelling. It was my last visit to him before he passed away. He had suffered brain damage in an accident and he said, "You know, my brain is telling me all kinds of weird things; all kinds of weird perceptions are coming up." At the very least, he had the mindfulness to recognize that they were weird. And then he added, "But that thing I got from my meditation. That hasn't left."

That's something you can depend upon. It's the only thing you can really depend on, so you want to develop the desire to find it. Nourish that desire and nourish whatever sense of self is skillful in pursuing that desire. Ultimately you'll have to let that self go, too, but in the meantime it's going to get you where you want to go. Like the raft across the river: Once you've crossed the river, you're not going to need the raft anymore. Everybody knows that part of

the story but people tend to forget that while you're crossing the river, you're going to need the raft, and you want a raft that—even though it won't last forever—will last long enough to get you safely to the other side. You're going to need to hold on to everything from right view on through right concentration. All these things require a sense of self that's strong, competent, willing to learn from mistakes, focused on doing what's skillful, learning to recognize what's not, admitting when you've made a mistake, and wanting to learn from it so your skills can grow more solid.

That may seem like a far away goal. That's renunciate grief: realizing that this takes time and energy. But it's time and energy well-spent. When you think of all the time and energy that has been wasted in your life and your many lifetimes, it shouldn't seem too much to put energy into this goal that doesn't lead to disappointment, doesn't lead to loss. It's the one thing that, when you attain it and you have to let go of the sense of self that got you there, you don't let go of it with regret. You let go with appreciation and joy.

Don’t Worry, Be Focused

December 27, 2011

In several passages in the Canon, the Buddha says that the main thing to keep in mind if you suddenly find yourself approaching death is not to worry. Now, he’s not saying don’t worry about the state of your mind; or don’t worry, everything is going to be okay; or don’t worry, be happy. He’s basically saying don’t worry, be focused. Stay centered and still, because the mind is going to grab at things if it hasn’t been trained. If you’ve been responsible for various things in your life, you suddenly realize you can’t be responsible for them anymore. If you’re attached to certain things, you have to let go—and for the untrained mind that’s very difficult. You’re going to flail around, trying to grab onto things that you can’t grab onto anymore, and to weigh yourself down with concerns about things you can’t be responsible for anymore, which is why you have to practice ahead of time.

As Ajaan Fuang used to say, “When you meditate, you’re actually practicing how to die.” You drop all your other concerns and focus on the state of your mind. While you have a breath to focus on, you focus on the breath as a place to gather the mind, and then you try to make sure that it doesn’t go sticking its arms or head out like a turtle.

A turtle is in its shell, there’s a fox outside, and the turtle knows that if it sticks its head out, or its tail, or any of its legs, the fox is going to get it, so it has to stay inside its shell. This is a skill you have to practice because it’s so easy—as you tell yourself you’re going to stay with the breath—for other members of the mind’s committee to have other ideas. Here you’ve got a whole hour. You could think about all kinds of things, and as soon as your mindfulness lapses, or your alertness lapses, there they go.

The mind goes out for two sorts of reasons. One, is because of misunderstanding and two, something’s wrong with your energy. Now, if it’s a case of misunderstanding, the mind tells itself you would really rather think about this or you’ve got to think about that, whatever. You have to learn to reason with those voices, to tell them: No, this is not the time for that. No matter how compelling the worries may be, you have to learn how to say No, No, No, we can’t go there right now.

One of the best arguments, when you’re worried about how things could

get really bad, is to remind yourself that you don't really know exactly *how* things could get really bad, but you do know that, regardless, you're going to need mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment to deal with whatever the situation is. Now, where are you going to get those qualities? You can get them only by developing them through the practice. This is what you're doing right now. Here is your opportunity to practice, so this is the best way to prepare for anything that's going to be difficult.

That's one example. You'll have to find in your own case what the best arguments are for all your different defilements.

This is a lot of what discernment is about. Sometimes people think that discernment is simply learning how not to think at all. You just watch arising and passing away and just let it arise and pass away, and that's it, but as long as there are any bits and pieces of misunderstanding hanging around in the mind, the mind is going to have its surreptitious ways of sneaking out again. So you have to look and see where the mind still has some mistaken ideas that would compel it to want to go after, say, sensual thinking or worries about this, worries about that. Then you learn how to cut those ideas short. Try to find some way to go straight for the jugular. The more you can find the heart of whatever the misunderstanding is, go straight for that, because you're trying to kill off your misunderstandings as quickly as possible so you can get back to work on your concentration as quickly as possible. That's how you deal with the distractions that come from misunderstanding.

As for the ones that come from an imbalance in your energy, you have to deal with them by trying to bring the energy back into balance. Sometimes it's a physical energy. When the body is all wired and the mind is bouncing around like a ping pong ball, you've got to find someplace in the body where the energy is solid and still. It's there. The body has many layers of energy, many different types of energy, so look for the counteracting energy. Where is there a sense of stillness inside? It might be in your bones. Your bones are very still. They're not wired. So think about your bones, how they just sit there, solid and heavy. Try to breathe in a way that allows you to get in touch with that sense of heaviness, solidity, to anchor you. Focus as much as possible on that.

There are other times when the distractions are more due to a low level of energy. A lot of the distractions come because you're just too weak to keep things in mind. You've been working hard all day. The mind feels weak. The body feels weak, and thoughts are just wandering all over the place with no

specific purpose. It's not that you feel a real need to think about these other things, it's just that your energy is so low that whatever comes popping up through the nervous system pops right into the mind and you don't have any defense against it. So you've got to find where your strength is.

Ajaan Lee talks about the energy that comes up the back of the spine. You might want to focus on that for a while, or just make up your mind you're going to focus on one little point in the body and just really stay right there and try to develop the quality of awareness that's like listening very intently for very subtle sounds. You don't hold anything back. You focus right in and stay right in, in, in, in, in. That way you gather whatever little energy you have and give it a charge. As you bring these energies together, they can begin to nourish one another. This is especially important when you find that the body is weak. When you're working with the breath and the body is still functioning, you find that there are different sources of energy in different parts of the body you can draw on.

Ajaan Lee also talks about being sensitive to outside energies. Different places have different kinds of energy. Different species of trees have different energies. In some of the places where you meditate, the energy is healthy and helpful; in other places, it's not so helpful. So you have to learn how to tune in to the levels of energy that are actually going to help you. If the energies from outside are not so helpful, you have to fill the body with your own energy to help keep them out.

But there will come times when you're really sick and there doesn't seem to be anything in the body that gives you any source of energy. That's where you've got to depend on the mind.

The Buddha enumerated five kinds of mental strength: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. You've got to find your energy here, and the energy starts with your understanding, understanding that your actions matter. That's what conviction is all about, and that can make a difference. But there are some areas where your actions can't make a difference. That's where you have to drop any worries you might have.

The Buddha lists three things that people might be worried about as they're approaching death. They might be worried about their children, their family; or they might be worried about their parents; or they might be concerned about the pleasures they're going to have to leave. Here we are in the human realm with all its human pleasures. You start thinking about the fact that you won't sense

these pleasures anymore: You won't see any beautiful sunsets, you won't see any rock canyons, you won't taste any delicious food—all the other pleasures you can think of. You have to put them aside, and one of the ways you can deal with that is to realize that there are better pleasures, on other levels of being, up in the heavens.

There's a sutta where the Buddha advises a person who's counseling someone who's dying to say, "Well, there are better pleasures than that." When you get the person focused on one level of heaven, you say, "Well, there are better pleasures than that." When the person is focused on the brahma worlds, you tell the person that even those brahma pleasures are inconstant. They're not going to last. Brahmas still have self-identity, which means they still suffer, even if it's only a subtle level. If the mind is really ready, it can actually let go at that point.

As for the things you might be worried about, you have to remind yourself that there comes a point where you have to put everything down. You can't carry the world around, or as they say in Thailand, you can't hold up the sky forever. When you see that those things are beyond you, you have to realize, okay, you did what you could, that's as far as you can get with that particular issue, that particular responsibility. Maybe someone else will pick it up, but even if they don't pick it up, you can't worry about that anymore. Your worries aren't going to help the situation. You've developed the perfections that come from working at that task and what's left is the dregs.

As Ajaan Lee said, it's like squeezing juice out of a piece of fruit. You've got the juice, and what's left of the fruit after you've taken the juice is just dregs. The juice is the good quality of the mind that you've developed. Don't forget that. Hold onto that. And to whatever extent you're able to be mindful, to be alert, you just keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. Don't give up. Have the conviction that fires your persistence, that enables you to stay mindful and alert. And the continuity of mindfulness and alertness is what develops concentration. At the very least, you want to stay really focused. When you can start making distinctions—the pain that's coming in, the sense of weakness, the sense of being overwhelmed, whatever—just see that "whatever" as an object of the mind, whereas your awareness is something else.

This is where discernment comes in and starts seeing the distinctions. There's the awareness of the feeling, but then the feeling itself is something else. Stay with the awareness. This is a constant theme throughout the

Wilderness Tradition. When Ajaan Maha Boowa gave those talks to the woman with cancer, that was one of the themes he repeated over and over again: Learn how to see the distinction between your awareness and the pain. In the talk we had from Ajaan Chah last night, that, again, was the message: The pain is one thing; the awareness is something else. Learn how to see that they really are distinct. They're already distinct, it's simply that we, in our ignorance, glom them together.

Now, this kind of discernment requires that you be really, really still, to see these distinctions. If the mind is running around, the distinctions are going to be blurred, but when you're really still you see that things actually do separate out that way, and the reason you didn't see that was because you were running past all the time.

So that's the energy of the mind. It's a focusing in, with the determination that you don't want to come back and suffer anymore. As for anything that pulls you away from that determination, that distracts you from that determination, you've got to learn how to drop it, drop it, drop it. All the stories, all the narratives that you tell yourself about who you are, what your responsibilities are, and what's going to happen in the world, what's going to happen to your family, your friends, all the projects that you take on: You need a spot in the mind where those things just don't matter, where the quality of your mind, the quality of your awareness does matter. So, you've got to stay focused. You've got to learn how to develop this quality of staying focused, of not letting yourself get distracted by whatever stories, or narratives, or sense of responsibility you may have, or fear that you're going to miss out on something. The really important things are right in here.

So, as we meditate, we're basically learning two things: the right way of understanding all this, and the right way of bringing your energy to bear, to develop this focus. When they talk about making the mind one, it's both a matter of the singleness of your focus and also of making the mind your first priority. This is the number one thing you need to work on, the number one thing of real value. I've always found it strange that people say that there's no essence to the Buddha's teachings; that the Buddha taught there is no such thing as essence. This comes from a modern academic prejudice against what they call essentialism. They like to see the Buddha as an early critic of essentialism, claiming that the Buddha denied the existence of any essence in you or in his teachings or in anything at all. But the Buddha never taught that.

He said that there is one thing of essence, and that's release: the mind when it's totally free. That has true value, essential value.

So, when you're making your mind one, it's both to bring it all together and to make that sense of release its one object, its one priority. That's what this practice is all about.

Recollecting the Devas

September 28, 2009

There was a monk back in the early part of the 20th century, Kruba Srivichai, who was well-known all over northern Thailand. He sponsored many construction projects and was responsible for getting lots of temples built. Bridges were built, even the road up to Doi Suthep was built by volunteer labor under his direction. Someone once asked him why all the projects he set his mind to succeeded. He answered that it was because he chanted the Mahasamaya Sutta three times every day. The devas liked hearing it and so gave him their behind-the-scenes help with his projects.

During my early years in Thailand, I happened to hear that story. I mentioned it to Ajaan Fuang. We were about to build a chedi at the monastery, and so he asked me to chant the Mahasamaya every day, and he chanted it every day. Even though at that point he was into his 60's, he was able to memorize it. And it became the basic chant at the monastery, the theory being that the devas would offer their help to the project because they liked to hear that their names were still remembered.

That's what the Mahasamaya is: a list of all the devas who came to hear the Buddha one night. He said that almost all the devas in the universe were present. Nothing much happened, except that at one point the garudas came and saw the nagas there. They were about to swoop down on the nagas, but the Buddha forged a truce between the nagas and the garudas. So the nagas like to hear this sutta as well.

This is something we can think about in terms of the recollection of the devas—which is a meditation exercise that very few people practice. But it's a useful practice for several reasons.

One, it reminds us of the possibilities out there. People sometimes have visions when they meditate, and beings sometimes appear in the visions. If you had an impoverished cosmology like we have here in the West, you would either think that you were going crazy or that the being was either an angel or an agent of the devil. But there are many more possibilities than just that. There are all kinds of beings out there. You don't want to show them any disrespect, because if you're out in the forest and beings appear in a vision, then if they really are beings, you don't want to offend them, for they could cause you

trouble. You want to treat them with good courtesy. On the other hand, though, you don't have to regard them as a force of evil and you don't have to regard them as reliable guides. They're just neighbors you want to get along with.

This is another area where the Buddha follows a middle path. Just because people have become spirits doesn't mean they know what they're talking about. And just because you can't figure out where these beings are coming from doesn't mean that they're necessarily evil. So you're polite with them, but you don't have to fear them or worship them.

Ajaan Mun offered a good example in this regard. One of his amazing accomplishments was his ability to rediscover a great deal of the practice, in many cases almost all on his own, out in the forest. An ordinary person out alone in the forest like that could easily go crazy, and yet he didn't. He had a lot of visions in his meditation—many more than his teacher, Ajaan Sao—but he realized it wasn't that he was somehow a better meditator than Ajaan Sao. It was just that he had this particular temperament and these particular problems. He regarded them as problems, but also as potentials. The biographies tell stories of how in his visions he would see devas who would come and teach him the Dhamma, tell him how he should practice, where he was lax in his observance of the rules, where he could be more precise.

For example, there's one account about when he was doing walking meditation. Devas appeared to him and said, "Now, when you're doing walking meditation, don't gaze around, looking at the scenery. You're supposed to be focusing on your mind. So try to keep your gaze controlled." He reflected that that was a good instruction, so he gave it a try and found that it helped improve his meditation. This is the important point about how he handled those visions. It wasn't that he accepted everything he was told. Whatever he saw in the vision, he would then take it and test it, and consider whether it really was a useful principle in training the mind—whether it would make him more scrupulous, make him more observant, give better results. In those ways, the visions were a good thing. But it wasn't the case that he accepted everything that came in every vision. Otherwise, he would have gone crazy.

Ajaan Fuang was another teacher who tended to have a lot of visions. He told me many times the two main points that Ajaan Mun had told him about visions. One, when you have a vision, it's your private affair. You can talk about it with your teacher but you don't want to go talking about it with other

people. Two, you have to analyze it, to see what kind of Dhamma lesson the vision is teaching. Then you have to analyze it further to figure out whether that Dhamma lesson is useful. This is the same principle we use with everything in the practice.

When you read a passage in the texts, there's no 100% guarantee that everything in the Pali Canon was said by the Buddha. So you have to test it. The Buddha himself encouraged us to test the teachings. His instructions to Gotami, his stepmother, and his instructions to Upali, the monk who was expert in Vinaya, all boil down to the fact that if you want to figure out what's really Dhamma and really Vinaya, you have to look at what kind of behavior it encourages, and what kind of results come from the behavior it encourages. If you find that it induces more passion, if it makes you hard for other people to support, or gets you entangled with other people, then it's not Dhamma, it's not Vinaya. If it leads to dispassion, to being content, to being unburdensome: That's Dhamma, that's Vinaya.

So whatever comes up in your meditation, whether it's an idea, a voice in your head, or a vision: It all has to be tested. As for visions that don't pass the test, let them go. If beings appear in the vision, you treat them with respect. You treat them with good courtesy. Wish them goodwill. This is why we chant the Mahasamaya, as an expression of courtesy, and an expression of goodwill for the devas. But the habit of extending goodwill to anyone who appears in a vision is a good habit to develop in any event. When any vision, say, of a member of your family, an old friend, anybody that you've had dealings with, appears in your meditation, wish that person goodwill, regardless of what your history is with that person. If a stranger appears in the meditation, wish that person goodwill. Then get back to your meditation object. This a good habitual attitude to develop. If the being appears powerful or angry, first fill your body with good breath energy and full awareness, as a form of protection, and then spread goodwill as an expression of harmlessness.

Another aspect of recollection of the devas is one that the Buddha recommends for people observing the uposatha precepts. He said that this uposatha we practice—the eight precepts that lay people observe on the full moon and new moon and half-moon days—are among the practices that lead to heaven. *Virtue* is one of the qualities that makes a person a deva. You can think about that in two ways. One is making you a deva after you die and the other is making you a deva while you're here now—in other words, lifting the quality

of your mind.

Another quality that makes you a deva is *conviction*—in particular, conviction in the Buddha's awakening. This doesn't mean conviction just in the *fact* that the Buddha was awakened but also in the *way* he awakened: how he did it by questioning his mind and examining his mind to see what was skillful, what was unskillful, and by having the heedfulness to keep developing what was skillful and abandoning what was not. That relentless cross-questioning he imposed on himself to root out any unskillful behavior, any attachments: That's how he gained his awakening. To have conviction in that means, of course, that that's the path that you want to follow, too. Look at your behavior carefully. Do it with a sense of compassion, do it with a sense of honesty, and you're sure to benefit.

Conviction here also means conviction in the principle that you *can* develop what's skillful, you *can* abandon what's unskillful. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha emphasized repeatedly the fact that strict determinism—the idea that everything that you experience has already been determined by the past—is a very unskillful teaching. The irony, of course, is that nowadays many people think that the Buddha's teaching on kamma is deterministic. But he went to great pains to say No.

He told the monks many times about his encounters with the Jains, his encounters with other deterministic teachers, and how, step by step by step, he refuted their teachings. It was rare for him to search out other people to refute in that way, but he saw the importance of emphasizing time and again that determinism is not the way things work. As he says, practice would be totally pointless if everything were predetermined by the past. So conviction also focuses on the principle that right now you can develop what's skillful and abandon what's not.

Another quality that makes you a deva is *generosity*. This is the beginning of right view—that there is what is given—which sounds almost too obvious to state. But you have to remember that back in the time of the Buddha the issue of generosity was a controversial one. The brahmans had been saying for centuries that generosity is fruitful, but you had to give to the brahmans for the gift to bear fruit. Other contemplative schools sprang up in reaction, saying, No, generosity doesn't bear any fruit at all, either because people's behavior is totally determined by the past, or because they just get snuffed out after death, with nothing left over—which means that it doesn't really matter whether

you're generous or not, for generosity bears no long-term rewards.

So when the Buddha asserted at the very beginning of mundane right view that generosity exists, that what is given exists, he was making two statements. One is that we do have freedom of choice; and two, our actions really are fruitful. There is a long-term benefit that comes from giving. In other words, giving material things, giving your time, giving your energy—giving is good.

A fourth quality that makes you a deva is *learning*. This means listening to the Dhamma, reading the Dhamma, and memorizing what you can. This is especially important in our modern culture because there is so much in modern media that goes against the Dhamma and they have so many ways of sneaking their messages into your head. All those commercial jingles that seem to be jingling and jangling around your head when you're meditating were designed to do just that: to get stuck in your nerves.

One of the basic principles of advertising is that "True happiness is impossible to find, so you'd better find your happiness with the stuff we're selling." It takes a strong effort not to give in to that message. This is why we need to listen to the Dhamma frequently, to read the Dhamma frequently, to do our best to understand it and to bear them in mind. Reading these things doesn't mean just believing them. You think about them, you contemplate them, you question them, and then try to put them into practice to see what develops as a result. But the essential message is the same all the way through: that how you develop your mind is of utmost importance. The important things in the world are not what someone else is doing someplace else. What's important is what you're doing right here, right now.

This leads to the fifth quality that makes you a deva, which is *discernment*. Now, even though not all devas are reliable guides all the way along the path, they still have at least some discernment, at least some insight into what's skillful and what's not. That's how they got where they are. The central point in this discernment is seeing clearly what works and what doesn't work, seeing clearly how cause and effect are connected, seeing clearly how things arise and pass away in the mind so you can get a sense of what's a cause, what's an effect, what's connected, what's not. That way you can focus on the causes of suffering so you can put an end to the suffering. But again you have to look in your own mind to learn these things. You can't depend on the devas to teach you.

The Canon contains some interesting stories about interactions between

monks and devas. One is about a female deva who sees a young monk right after his bath in a river. He's standing on the bank of the river wearing only his under robe, and she's attracted to him. She comes down and says, "Hey, you're wasting your time. Wait until you're old. Then you can become a monk." He says, "No, I'm not wasting my time. I'm putting my time to good use." A conversation ensues between the two of them, with a lot of Pali wordplay around the word, "time," and she's confused.

So he offers to take her to see the Buddha. She says she's never been able to get in to see the Buddha because the devas around him are too powerful. So he tells her, "I'll see what I can do to get you in." So he goes to the Buddha, with her following in his wake. The Buddha starts teaching her some really high level Dhamma and she doesn't understand a word. So he brings the level of his teaching down bit by bit, and finally, again, he says something very refined, very profound about the training of the mind, and then asks her, "What do you understand?" She says, "I understand that giving is good. Virtue is good." That's as far as she was able to get.

So you have to watch out for devas like that. Some devas have a little bit of discernment that doesn't go very far. This is true even of the Brahmas. In another sutta a monk gains a vision of some devas in his meditation, so he asks them, essentially, "Where does the physical universe end, how far does it go?" The devas say, "We don't know, but there's another level of devas above us. Maybe they know." So he meditates some more and he sees those devas. He asks them and they reply, "We don't know either, but there's another level above us." So he gets sent up, level by level, up through the deva bureaucracy. Finally he gets to a very high level of devas and again asks them where the limits of the physical universe are. They don't know, either. "But," they say, "there is the great Brahma and sometimes he will appear in a great flash of light. So if a flash of light appears and you see him, you can ask him." Finally, as the monk meditates some more, the great flash of light appears, and there's the great Brahma. So the monk goes up to the Brahma and asks, "How far does the physical universe go? Where do earth, water, wind, and fire end?" And the great Brahma says, "I am the great Brahma, knower of all, seer of all, creator of everything that has been and will be."

Now if this had been the Book of Job, the monk would have said, "Okay, I understand. You're much greater than I am." And he would have left it at that. But this is not the Book of Job. It's the Pali Canon. The monk says, "That's not

what I asked you. How far does the physical universe go?" The great Brahma says, "I am the great Brahma, knower of all, seer of all, creator of all, father of all that ever has been and will be." The monk again says, "That's not what I asked you." Finally the great Brahma takes him by the elbow, pulls him aside, and says, "Look, I don't know. But my retinue here thinks that I know everything. It'd be a great disappointment for them to hear that I didn't know something like this." So he sends the monk back down to the Buddha. The Buddha tells him, "You asked the wrong question. The question is, 'Where does the physical universe find no footing?'" And the reply is consciousness without surface or consciousness without feature: the consciousness of the awakened one. So even the great Brahma has limits on his discernment.

But this doesn't mean that the devas are all ignorant. There's another story about a monk living in the forest. He goes down to a pond of water to bathe and bends over to sniff a lotus growing in the pond. A deva appears suddenly and says, "Hey, you just stole the scent of that flower." And the monk basically says, "Oh, come on, that's not stealing." The deva replies, "Look, for anyone who really wants to purify his mind, even the slightest fault should appear as large as a cloud." In those days, a cloud that covers the whole sky was the largest thing imaginable. The monk comes to his senses and replies, "Well, gee, I guess you're right. Thank you for informing me. And if you see me making other mistakes like that again, please let me know." But the deva says, "I'm not your servant. You should look after yourself." And she disappears.

So visions like this might happen in your meditation. It doesn't happen only in Asia. I know people who, especially here in the Southwest, have had lots of visions when they go to places like Bryce, Zion, or Arches—spirits of Indians, the coyote god, a lot of spirits corresponding to Native American legends. Some of these meditators have no knowledge of Native American legends, yet they see many of the same things. So it's good to remember the basic principle for how you treat devas. You recollect their virtues. You treat them with respect. And then you take what you learn from them and you put it to the test to see if it really is conducive to training the mind.

As for the recollection of the virtues of the devas, that's useful if you want to raise the level of your mind here in present life. You don't have to wait until you become a deva. Ajaan Suwat *did* make a statement once, saying that when you're thinking about your next life, don't make a determination to come back as a human being. The human world is going to go through a lot of difficulties.

It’d be better to take rebirth as a deva. The belief that devas can’t practice is not true. There are lots of devas who practice. If they get the opportunity to hear the Dhamma, they can even gain the noble attainments.

But for right now, focus on those deva virtues right here. How do you make your mind a deva mind right now? How do you make your actions deva actions? Focus right now on conviction, generosity, virtue, learning, and discernment, regardless of whether you have visions or not. And that way recollection of the devas really can raise the level of your mind.

Recollection of Hell

February 9, 2010

We're sitting here fabricating, putting together a sense of the body, putting together feelings, perceptions, more fabrications, even putting together our consciousness of these things. It's something we do all the time. And the things we put together are not totally mind-made. The raw materials come from our past actions. Sometimes those materials are good and sometimes the range they offer is pretty limited. But the mind has this obsession to keep on fabricating, keep on making these things. They last for a while, and then you have to make new ones, scrounging around for whatever you can find to give rise to a sense of pleasure. We go for the pleasure but deep down instinctively we know that it's not going to last, which is why we tend to gobble our pleasures when they come, then cast around to see what we can do either to maintain the ones we've got or to create new ones to gobble down next.

The pleasure we get out of this process is what keeps us going. And our sense of control leads to our sense of possession: that we have the ability to create these pleasures and to consume them. As long as the raw materials are good, we're doing fine.

Like right now: There are many good aspects to what we've got going on around outside us. The rain may be cold, but there's something about a rainy day or rainy night that tends to focus the mind inside. All around us outside is wet, so instinctively we look inside to see what potentials we have here for security and warmth. And all of this would be okay if it weren't for the fact that it's so precarious. It depends so much on the range of materials that are available and yet that range can change so quickly and radically.

This evening I was reading a piece on Germany in the early 1930s. People were saying, "Oh, dictatorship couldn't happen here." That was just a year before Hitler took power. And for many of the people who were saying that, things turned very bad, very quickly. The range of options open to them suddenly narrowed down horribly. So there is political change, economic change, earthquakes, storms, illness, death.

Death is the most radical change, because you have no idea where you'll get thrown the next time around. The ground can disappear from beneath your feet. And yet the mind keeps going with that insatiable drive for more feeding,

more fabricating. That's why we get reborn or experience rebirth. We keep looking for more. We keep craving things to feed on, to cling to, to fabricate, to turn into the kind of food we enjoy. Yet there are times when we suddenly find ourselves in places where the options are not appetizing at all. If the uncertainty of the human realm isn't scary enough, you can think about the Buddha's descriptions of hell: all those hell beings trying to fabricate some happiness out of horrendous surroundings.

What seems particularly horrible about the hell realms is that they hold out a glimmer of hope for happiness. Think of the glowing iron hell with an open door on the far side. Everybody is running through fire, their bodies aflame, to get to the door, hoping to get out. But right as they get to the door, it slams shut. Then a door opens on another wall, so they go running through the fire to get to that door, which—just as they get to it—also slams shut in their face. This keeps up until finally they do get through one of the doors, and it turns out that the door leads to a hell of shit. And things just get progressively worse.

There are hells where the hell guardians finally pull you out with a hook. You think you've escaped. They even play nice cop and ask what you want. You say you're hungry and thirsty. Your first thought is your need to feed. So they laugh, pour molten copper into your mouth, and then throw you back in.

These are some of the possible places where fabrication can lead you—this need we have to keep turning the raw materials of experience into form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. So it helps you realize that when things are going well, you want to fabricate a way out. Because for most of us, what do we do? We play around. Things get comfortable and we like to play, just fabricating for the pure joy of fabrication. This is what music and art are all about. Fabricating purely for entertainment, without realizing that the fabrications we make are a kind of kamma. If we neglect the opportunity to create something good and solid out of these fabrications—in other words, creating a path that leads to something secure—then those periods of play, those periods of joy, are just little interludes. They can suddenly come crashing down.

Which means that when things are going well, we have to be heedful. We've got this opening. We've got this opportunity. We want to make the best of it. Even when things aren't going well, we want to make the best of what we do have, to figure out what's the most skillful path to make out of these potentials.

The Buddha says the most skillful thing we can fabricate is the noble eightfold path, like we're doing right now: focusing on the breath. That's a form, one of the elements of form. You direct your thoughts to the breath and evaluate the breath: That's a type of fabrication. You hold the perception of breath in mind, all this so you can create a sense of feeling that's pleasant, easeful. You want to spread that throughout the body. Then you've got a consciousness that's aware of all this. The fabrication of mindfulness is trying to keep you here. That's what mindfulness is: a kind of fabrication, reminding you what to do. Alertness is also a fabrication, as is the ardency with which you try to do all of this skillfully. You're trying to turn these aggregates into factors of the path—right mindfulness and right concentration—a way out of all the potential heavens and hells to which the aggregates, these processes of fabrication, can lead you.

Even the development of discernment in right view is a kind of perception. You apply the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to the aggregates. First, as you're sitting here trying to create a sense of ease for the breath to get the mind concentrated, anything else would count as a distraction. Whatever's a distraction, try to see it as stressful, inconstant, and not-self. That helps you to wean yourself away from the attractions of playing around with those distractions.

Ultimately, once the outside distractions have been dealt with, you start turning around to apply the same perceptions to the state of concentration you've got going here. You realize: Here are aggregates as well. And although the stress may be subtle, it's still there. The inconstancy may be subtle, but it's still there—which means that these things are not totally under your control. They're not the ultimate happiness.

As you keep that perception in mind and convince yourself of its truth, that's when the mind begins to incline toward the deathless. It perceives the deathless as a desirable goal, and that perception can help open the way to an actual experience of the deathless. Yet even then, the mind has this tendency: It likes to keep fabricating, so it can create a sense of passion around the deathless when it experiences it. That's why there are different levels of awakening. The lower levels still have a sense of passion. There is still some fabrication going on around the perception of the deathless. This is why, when the Buddha describes the contemplation of the aggregates, first there's: "All fabrications are inconstant. All fabrications are stressful." Then there's: "All

dhammas are not-self." The word *dhamma* here applies to unfabricated phenomena, like the deathless, as well. Whatever passion you fabricate for that, you have to learn how to let go of that, too. Only then can there be full awakening.

So it is possible to use these aggregates as a path to a truly safe place. Some of the epithets for nibbana—haven, harbor, refuge, security—emphasize its aspect as genuinely safe. Without that safety, the mind just keeps gobbling things down and trying to fabricate more. If it can't find good things to gobble down, it just stuffs horrible things inside itself. It takes whatever it can get. If it can't get good things, it takes pain and gobbles down the pain, fabricating even worse pain for itself. It gobbles down molten copper and shit. That's our tendency. We want happiness, but we take whatever potentials we've got, and we turn them into suffering, we turn them into stress. We turn them into misery, all because of our ignorance. And then we gobble them down.

Only when we learn how to look directly at this process of fabrication and do it with knowledge, understanding where there's stress, what's causing the stress, what can be done to put an end to it: Only when we bring that knowledge to the process can it become a path that really does lead away from stress and suffering, does really lead to security where there's no more potential for any more stress.

When the Buddha described those hells that can open up to us if we don't reach that security, he said at the end of the description that he hadn't heard these things from other people. He'd seen them directly for himself. They're really out there: these horrendous states of suffering we can fall into. And all our continual obsession right here with fabricating and feeding and fabricating more and feeding more is what can lead us there if we're not careful.

So now that things are going relatively well, you don't want to just fool around and play, looking for fun. You realize that there's work to be done. Remember the old story of the ant and the grasshopper. During the summer, the grasshopper just sang and sang, and the ant kept working, working, working away. The grasshopper kept saying, "Why are you working? It's so nice out. Let's just sing." And the ant replied, "Winter is coming. Winter is coming." The grasshopper said, "Well, I'll take winter when it comes. I'd rather sing right now." Then, of course, when the winter came, the ants went underground. They had food and they survived. The grasshoppers all died of the cold.

So as you're fabricating here, remember: Meditation is not just an

opportunity to sing and to have a good time. We've got this whole hour here; we've got whole days to meditate. We don't know how much longer these days are going to last. The world is a very precarious place. Our kamma is very precarious. You have no idea what good and bad things lurk in the dark pool of your past kamma. But what you do know is that you've got this opportunity right here, right now. So do your best to fabricate it into a path, a path that really goes someplace safe, secure—a refuge where there's no lurking danger at all.

Skills of the Dhamma Wheel

November 10, 2009

Every time we chant the Sutta on Setting the Dhamma Wheel in Motion, I like to look at the Dhamma wheel up on the wall, the one my father made years back: It's going on 13 years now. It's got twelve spokes, which symbolize one of the passages in the sutta where the Buddha goes through the four noble truths and the three types of knowledge for each truth: knowing the truth, knowing the duty appropriate to that truth, and then knowing that you've completed that duty. Four truths, three levels of knowledge, three times four is twelve: That's the wheel in the Dhamma wheel. And it should form the basic frame for the way we look at our practice. It's how we should frame our attention to things.

The Buddha never taught bare attention. He talked about only two kinds of attention: appropriate and inappropriate. When you attend to things, it's not really bare. The fact that you're noticing something, paying attention to something, means you have a purpose in mind. Even if you decide that you're going to pay attention to whatever pops up, regardless, there are still subtle choices going on. With many things happening all at once, you can't help but pay attention to one thing rather than another, and you can't help doing something about what you're paying attention to. There is a purpose, there is an intention, there is an activity that goes along with your attention. It's important, as a meditator, that you be very clear about this. Otherwise, if you think you've reached bare attention and you're told that that's a taste of awakening, a taste of the deathless, a taste of the unconditioned, you stop looking. You don't dig deeper to see, "Wait a minute, what's going on here? Is there an element of intention here? Is this fabricated or is it not?"

In one of Ajaan Maha Boowa's Dhamma talks he tells you to test everything, to be willing to destroy everything that comes up, because whatever is really true and really unconditioned is not going to be touched by your efforts to destroy it. Now the word "destroy" here means that you learn how to take it apart, question it, see if you can figure out how it's formed, how it can be made to come and how it can be made to go. This goes for everything, including the act of attention itself.

There's always going to be an element of intention in the act of attention. When the Buddha places attention in the series of conditions in dependent co-

arising, it's under the category of "name," mixed up with contact and intention and perception and feeling, and all of these factors have fabrication underlying them. So there's a lot going on even when you think you're just giving bare attention to something. One of your tasks as a meditator is to notice that, to ferret it out and to learn how to apply *appropriate* attention to what's going on. What makes it appropriate is that the perceptions related to it are framed in terms of the four noble truths and the duties appropriate to those truths—or, you might say, the skills appropriate to those truths.

That's because they're the activities the Buddha encourages you to apply to the different truths. Stress or suffering, he said, is something that you have to comprehend. To comprehend means to know it so thoroughly that you develop dispassion for it. We usually don't think that we're passionate for stress and suffering, but we really are. The things we generally are passionate about carry a lot of stress with them, but we just choose to ignore that fact. So an important part of the practice is to make the effort to see how these things we love, these things we're passionate about, have that side to them: that stressful, suffering side. Then we keep focusing on that stressful side until we can develop a sense of dispassion for it.

The duty with regard to the cause of stress is to let it go. Letting go is also a skill. You don't just toss things out willy-nilly. You look to see: Where is the craving, where is the ignorance that underlies that stress? As you do this, you have to learn how to discern which desires you want to hold onto for the time being, and which ones you want to let go of—because the path includes desire as part of right effort, and that's something you should develop. The path is something you want to develop until it's served its function, and then you let it go. That requires discernment.

The duty with regard to the cessation of stress and suffering is to realize it, to verify it, to bear witness to it, i.e. to directly experience it. In other words, you experience what it means to let go of craving, to develop dispassion for craving. This, too, is a skill. You have to learn how to watch yourself let go of a particular craving and notice that it really does take a burden off the mind. For the most part, we don't notice these things. When we drop one craving, we're quick to go to another one. In fact, that's usually why we drop the first one: We think we've found something better to crave, something more interesting, something new, something intriguing. You get tired of what you've been holding onto, and so you go grabbing at something new. There's very

little time to stop and notice: What is it like to let go of craving? In what way does it decrease suffering?

At the same time, there are things to develop. That's the path, starting with right view and going on through right concentration. And although there is a stage at the very end of the practice where you let go of the path as well, you've got to develop it in the meantime.

The purpose of looking at things in this way is to have a framework for how you're going to understand your life, and how you can use that understanding to free yourself from suffering. The Buddha wants you to drop the framework where you're looking at yourself, yourself, yourself all the time: what's me, what's mine, what I've got that I don't like, what I've got that I do like. He asks you to put those concepts aside and use these other concepts as a way of framing things, because the two frameworks have different imperatives. If there's a "me" that you have to shore up, that you have to look after, then it carries the imperative of figuring out how to feed this me, how to choose food for it, how to make sure you have a good store of food, and how to make sure that that store of food is going to last. These are all imperatives of getting, getting, and getting. When the world goes well, everything is smooth, the teeth on that "getting" aren't too sharp or too vicious. But when things get really difficult, when resources get scarce, you've got to watch out because the imperative to feed—physically and emotionally—is not always a friendly one.

If that's the framework for our attention and the imperatives that we're acting on, things can get pretty nasty. So the Buddha says to look at things simply as stress, its cause, its ending, and the path of practice leading to its ending. Learn to depersonalize everything. That carries a different set of imperatives, a friendlier set of imperatives. Instead of trying to push away your sufferings, you try to understand them. When you can't understand them, you develop the path to make the mind really quiet, still, alert, until it's in a position to see the difference between the stress and the cause of stress, so you can apply the appropriate duty.

It's like going into a room where there's a lot of smoke. You don't put out the smoke. You try to put out the fire that's causing the smoke. If you go around putting out the smoke, the fire just keeps churning out more and more smoke all the time, and you never come to the end of it.

The same with the mind: One of our problems is we don't really understand what to do with stress. We try to abandon it, and it just won't be

abandoned. The more we try to shake it off, the more firmly it sticks to us, burning us all the time. We have to work our way through the smoke to find the fire: That's what you put out. That's what you let go of: the cause of stress. So focus on learning how to distinguish these things, in the same way you have to distinguish between the kind of craving that causes stress and the kind of craving or desire that develops the skillful factors of the path.

All of this requires skill. In fact, one way of translating ignorance, *avijja,* is "lack of skill." The knowledge that replaces it, *vijja,* is skilled knowing, which comes from having developed the skills. Note that there is a doing and a gradual perfection, a gradual mastery, of these different imperatives. When you've got the framework firmly in mind, then when things come up, you can perceive them in terms of that framework, and that way you know what to do with them. As you keep trying to do the right duty, you get better and better at it, until you have it completely mastered.

In many ways, even though it's all too often overlooked, the most essential passage in the sutta, the heart of the sutta, is the wheel. Back in the Buddha's time, that's what they would call the combining of two variables: not a table, but a wheel. You see this in the legal texts, like the Vinaya. There would be many possible factors for an offense, so they'd run through all the various permutations, around the circle to show the verdict in each possible case. In this case, there are four truths and three levels of knowledge, so the sutta just goes around the list, one by one by one, until it's gone through all the twelve permutations. This is why it's called the Dhamma wheel, and why we have the wheel of Dhamma with twelve spokes on our wall. It's also a convenient symbol to make you think about the circle that goes around the rim of the wheel. It's the framework for how we want to perceive things, and to understand what you've got to do once you understand. When you have an experience, you know where to put it in the framework of the four noble truths, so you know what to do with it.

This is the kind of attention we're trying to develop. The Buddha would often say at the beginning of a Dhamma talk: Pay careful attention. This didn't mean just to listen carefully. It also meant to bring the right framework, the right framework of thought and questioning, to see how you can get the most out of what he has to say. Then you take that framework and apply it to your practice.

For instance, as you're sitting here right now: Where in the breath is

stress? What quality of mind can you bring to the breath to alleviate that stress—to help put an end to it, to undercut the cause of stress? Even just thinking in these very basic terms of how you deal with the breath is the beginning of the framework for the four noble truths.

Then as you work with the breath, as you get more and more skilled at it, you can take the skills and turn around and start applying them to the mind, to the different events in the mind. You find that this framework will take you far. That's why the Buddha said that the most important internal quality for awakening is appropriate attention.

So see if you can bring this way of looking at things to bear right here, right now, at the breath. Start getting some practice in mastering those skills.

The Particulars of Your Suffering

September 22, 2011

I once knew a journalist in Bangkok who asked me why Buddhism focuses so much on suffering. He said, "I don't have any suffering in my life. Why all the talk about suffering?" So I asked him if he had any stress in his life and he said, "Oh yeah, lots and lots of stress." And he proceeded to tell me all the different things in his family and his work that were stressing him out.

So regardless of what you call it, suffering or stress, if you're not an arahant, you're suffering from it. And it's good to recognize that everybody is suffering in the same way. There are differences in the particulars, but deep down inside everybody has that same sense of being burdened, being overcome: pushed in ways they'd rather not be pushed, weighed down in ways they'd rather not be weighed down.

As the Buddha said, when you face *dukkha*—suffering or stress—you have two reactions. One is a sense of bewilderment: Why is this happening to me? And the second is a search: Is there anyone who knows a way out from this suffering and stress?

The Buddha took that sense of bewilderment very seriously. The other teachings given in his time that he criticized the most were the ones that he said leave people bewildered: teachings that would say there's nothing you can do because you have no power of actionor choice. That, he said, leaves you unprotected, leaves you bewildered. Or the teaching that your life is totally dependent on the decisions of some creator god: That, too, leaves you unprotected and bewildered. Or the teaching that everything is random, there's no pattern to why you suffer, so no matter how hard you try to figure it out, there's no pattern to be discerned: That leaves you bewildered and unprotected as well, for it leaves you with no way of making a decision as to what you should and shouldn't do to deal with your suffering.

So he offered his teachings as aids both in overcoming bewilderment and in finding protection, i.e., protection from the suffering. One of the first things he has you do is try to take the personal sting out of your suffering. This is very hard for people to do. We're obsessed with the particulars of our suffering. I've noticed that people can go over and over and over again the particulars of why they're suffering and why their suffering is special. This, of course, keeps

them more bound to their suffering.

So it's important that you look into why you may have that feeling: what sort of special attention you want to demand, or you feel you deserve. I've run into some people who develop that feeling of deserving special attention to the point where, if they're not given that special attention, they see themselves as martyrs. There's a certain enjoyment in martyrdom, but it still leaves you unprotected. It's still not a solution for suffering.

You don't want to focus on the particulars. You want to focus on a different kind of detail: the universal details. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has us develop the *brahma-viharas:* realizing that everybody is suffering and it would be better if we could all find a way to true happiness; feeling compassion for all those who are suffering and empathetic joy for those who are not.

In other words, if you see that someone's better off than you are, you don't give into feelings of jealousy or resentment. You don't want to pull them down to your level or what you perceive as your level. After all, if you really look carefully into people's hearts, you find that even people who look happy on the outside still have their suffering. It may seem minor to you, but it's still suffering. Remember, we're all looking for happiness and many of us have found at least a measure of happiness but it's not secure. So there's no need to feel jealousy for people who are in what seems to be a fortunate but actually is a very unsecure place. You're happy for them but you also need to have compassion for their insecurity.

Then there's equanimity, realizing that there's an awful lot going on, both in the world and in you, that your choices cannot change. There are people you would like to see happier than they are, but they're not. There are things you can't change in one way or another in your own life. You realize that other people have the same problem: There are things in their lives that they would like to change but they can't.

This is how equanimity gives rise to a sense of *samvega:* the realization that we're all suffering in one way or another, and in a lot of ways we can't do anything about. Unless we practice.

To think of all the suffering in the world is not meant to get you depressed. It's meant for you to question yourself: How can I find a way out? If I can find a way out, how can I share it with others? This means that instead of looking to other people for a cure for your suffering, leading to your happiness, you want

to find what you can within.

This way, having looked at all the sufferings of other beings, and developing a sense of goodwill for all beings, you come back to the particulars of your suffering from a different perspective. Instead of looking at what makes your suffering special or different, you want to look at it in terms of what it has in common with everyone else's.

This is where the Buddha's summary of what suffering *is* becomes really important. It's the five clinging aggregates: clinging to form, clinging to feeling, clinging to perceptions, clinging to fabrications, clinging to consciousness at the senses. It sounds pretty abstract, and you may wonder where the Buddha got this particular way of dividing up the pie of your experience. Apparently, it comes from his practice of concentration. When you try to get the mind to settle down here in the present moment, the first thing you come into contact with, of course, is the body. You've got the breath coming in, going out. That's form. And you're going to encounter feelings. There'll be feelings of pleasure, feelings of pain, neither pleasure nor pain. You want to learn how to deal with those feelings in a way that allows you to settle down. This is where perception comes in. You perceive the breath not only as the air coming in and out of the lungs but also as energy that suffuses the body. You start thinking about how that energy could be adjusted, how it could be made more comfortable so that you have a better place to settle down. That's fabrication: thinking about the breath and then evaluating the breath. Then there's the consciousness of all these things.

So those are the components of concentration practice. And you find that as you try to bring the mind into oneness with its object, you have to learn how to isolate these particular functions of the mind, these aspects of your experience, so that you can adjust them skillfully. How do you adjust the form, i.e., the breath? Well, that requires fabrication and it also requires perception because some perceptions get in the way of even imagining that breath energy could go down the back or out the legs, or that it could have an effect on any pains that you might feel in the body, any sense of blockage in the body. If you perceive the breath simply as air coming in and out of the lungs, then the breath is totally irrelevant, say, to the sense of blockage in your knee. But if you perceive the breath as the energy flowing through the nerves and through the blood vessels, then the question is: Why is there a blockage there? How is it related to the flow of the breath? How can you get around it? How can you dissolve it away?

You need to learn how to isolate your perceptions and then adjust them.

You also need to learn how to isolate your feelings. There may be pains in different parts of the body but is there pain everywhere in the body? No. Some parts of the body feel okay. And because they're simply okay they may not demand a lot of attention, but if you learn how to give them attention and space to grow, to develop, then this sense of okay-ness becomes more than just okay. It becomes positively pleasant. There's a sense of fullness and refreshment that can come when you give these areas of wellbeing in the body some space, when you give them a chance to grow as you hover around them and protect them.

So as you're getting the mind to settle down, these are the mental functions you have to pay attention to: feeling, perception, fabrication. At the same time, you gain a different sense of your consciousness. It doesn't have to be just in one spot or scattered outside. You can suffuse the whole body with your awareness so that you're sensitive to the whole body, all at once, all at once continually. This allows the mind to settle down so that you can drop the activity of evaluation because everything feels really fine and you can actually become one with the breath, along with a sense of ease and fullness.

Sometimes, though, the fullness gets to be too much. This is where perception comes in handy again. You can perceive a more subtle level of breath energy that's not so active, not so burdensome—because the sense of rapture can get really strong. In the beginning it's really nice to have that sense of refreshment and fullness, but after a while it can get tiresome and oppressive. So you can use your perception of a more subtle breath energy to tune into a different level where there's simply ease in the body.

Then you use your sense of perception to let the breath stop, as you hold in mind the idea that there is an oxygen exchange at the pores of your skin. And if the mind is really, really still, the brain is using less oxygen, and the oxygen coming in through the pores is enough. So it's okay to allow the breathing to stop.

This is the way the mind gets into stronger and stronger concentration. From there you can move it even to more subtle levels of concentration. When the breath energy is still, your sense of the definition of the body, the surface of the body, begins to dissolve. It's like you're sitting here with a cloud of little dots of feeling. You have the option of focusing on the dots or on the space between the dots. You realize that that space has no end; there's no boundary

around it. You hold that perception in mind. That creates an even more subtle level of concentration. And so on through the different levels of absorption. It's all a matter of feeling and perception. Fabrications of different kinds fall silent as your directed thought and evaluation drop away, as the motion of the breathing drops away.

It's in this way that the different aggregates separate out. You isolate them as you get the mind into concentration in the same way that someone who has to develop a physical skill has to learn how to isolate different muscles. When you're playing the piano, when you're dancing, you have to be able to isolate the different muscles in your hands and arms and legs and back, in your torso in general, so that you can move the body in precisely the way you want. It's the same way with concentration practice. You have to isolate these different functions of the mind to get the mind to settle down.

Once you've isolated them, you've got the raw material for understanding why there's suffering, because the Buddha said that suffering is clinging to these aggregates. You've got hands-on experience with all these fabrications. In fact, one of the most important insights in all of this is to see how all of these different aggregates are fabricated. There's an intentional element in each, even in your experience of the form of the body. For instance, you have hands all the time but you're conscious of them only when you think of using them, when you feel the need to use them. Otherwise, the perception of the hands gets blurred. The same with the other parts of the body. There's an intentional element in your experience of all these things.

So look into that intentional element, that element of fabrication, to see where any clinging is lurking in there. By looking at your experience in this way, you're getting yourself out of the narratives, all the particular, personal details of your particular sufferings—the details that distract you from actually learning how to put an end to the suffering. Instead, you turn your attention to the details that help you get out. Exactly how is perception contributing to your suffering? How is feeling, how is fabrication, form, consciousness? What does it mean to cling to these things? The Buddha defines clinging as passion and delight, and it can come in four ways: through sensual obsessions, through views, through habits and practices, and through ideas of what your identity is. Those are the ways in which we cling, in which we take passion and delight in these aggregates.

As we do this, we're moving into some very delicate details here but

they're details of a different sort. They're not so personal in the sense of your particular narrative of your particular sufferings, but they *are* personal in the sense that they're intimate. They're happening right in your own mind. By looking at the intimate details that all forms of suffering have in common, you open the possibility of freeing yourself.

So wherever you find yourself caught up in the details of why you're suffering or why you're feeling that nobody loves you, nobody cares for you, nobody's really helping you with your sufferings, or why you're oppressed by a particular aspect of your life, remember: Everybody's suffering in one way or another. Obsessing about those particular details is not going to get you out. But if you turn around and look at the universal details, that opens the possibility to freedom.

Learn to acquaint yourself with these aggregates in action as you get the mind to settle down—because they provide the key for understanding how you can do more than just settle down. You can make your escape.

Isolating the Aggregates

July 20, 2011

As the Buddha says, one of the rewards of concentration is that you get to understand the aggregates: what's form, what's feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness. You get to watch how they arise; you get to watch how they pass away. When you see them clearly, you can begin to see where you're clinging to them and how the clinging involves suffering. Only when you can pinpoint these things can you begin to let go. It's like having a room full of piles of stuff. Only when you sort things out can you begin to see which things have to be thrown away and which things should be kept.

One of the reasons why concentration helps this sorting out process is that you can see things clearly only when the mind is really still. But another reason is that you actually get hands-on practice in manipulating these things in the course of getting the mind to settle down in concentration. It's in the course of that hands-on practice that you can begin sorting them out.

It's like learning a physical skill—playing a musical instrument or dancing or learning a sport: You have to isolate your sense of the muscles you're using if you want to master the skill. If the skill involves jumping and you haven't been able to isolate the different muscles in your legs and the other parts of the body that you're going to employ, the jump is going to be clumsy. But as you get your own sense from within of which muscles are needed to make the jump graceful or make it go far or high, then you perform a lot better.

It's the same way with the meditation. We start out trying to focus on the breath and we put a lot of pressure on it, for fear that if we don't, the mind's going to slip away. Of course, a lot of the pressure on the breath has an effect on the circulation of fluids and energies in the body. You can create a lot of tension, a lot of tightness, a lot of discomfort doing it that way. And even all that tension and tightness doesn't prevent you from slipping off because there's more to concentration than just pressure. You've got all these other mental activities going on that you have to learn how to master as well. Pressure on its own isn't going to bring everything to stillness. You need to understand your raw materials.

To deal effectively with the breath, you have to get a better understanding of how you're sensing the body from within. This means looking at it in terms

of the properties that make up the aggregate of form—earth, water, wind, and fire—along with space and consciousness or awareness. Ordinarily, when you breathe in, there's a feeling of pressure that you spread through the body. So when we say to spread your awareness through the body or to spread the breath through the body, your immediate reaction is to spread pressure through the body, but that's not going to get good results. In fact, it can create problems. You have to learn to separate these things out: Which sensations are the breath sensations that flow through the body without disturbing anything else at all, without exerting any pressure at all? If there's pressure, it's an affair of the breath element pushing the water element against the earth element. So you have to separate those out, so that you're spreading only the breath.

As for awareness, that's not something physical, so why should your awareness create pressure in the different parts of the body? Again, you have to learn how to spread your awareness without pushing the other properties at all.

When you can start to separate these things out, it gets a lot easier to settle down and stay with the breath, realizing that the breath energy doesn't have to be penned in by anything, doesn't have to exert pressure on anything. It can flow smoothly, lightly, all through the body, instantaneously. You don't have to drag it through during the in-breath. You don't have to squeeze it back out with the out-breath.

Some people say "I try to breathe down through the body through the in-breath and I only get as far as the neck or only as far as the middle of the back before I have to start breathing out." Well, that's a misconception of the breath. You've probably been pushing some blood down there without realizing it—because there's an aspect to the breath that, as soon as you're aware that you've begun to breathe in, has already gone throughout the whole body. When you can learn how to detect that, it gets a lot easier to follow, to stay with the breath.

The same with feelings. We talk about giving rise to a feeling of pleasure with the breath, pleasure with the concentration. Where does it come from? You can't push pleasure into the body. You have to realize that there are lots of little centers in the body, little sensation centers, and all you have to do is give them a little bit of space, and then a feeling of what seems like neutrality to begin with will actually become pleasurable—if you give it space, if you're not pushing and pulling it around too much. Then the more consistently you can

maintain that sense of space, the greater the pleasure grows. And you let it spread without pressure. It becomes rapture: a sense of refreshment, fullness. Sometimes it can get so intense that you feel like you're drowning. You're not. It's simply the fact that you're allowing these sensations to move through the body and the movement of the breath is not disturbing them. It's giving them space.

This means that sensations that you used to associate with the in-and-out breath are not happening. Now, some spot inside your mind may be setting up alarm signals, but you have to reassure it that everything is all right. The breath is still moving, it's still coming in, going out, but your old forced ways of breathing are not happening. When you learn that it was forced and unnecessary, you find that you can breathe in and out with a much greater feeling of rapture, fullness, and pleasure. It becomes something you can tap into at any time.

As you learn how to dissociate the breath from the pressure, dissociate your awareness from the pressure, you begin to see that what was holding you back from settling in properly was your original perception of the breath. Now that you've changed that perception, the new perception is what's helping to hold you comfortably in place. There's a mental label that just says, "breath," and there's a picture that goes along with the label. And as you've learned, some pictures about the breath are more conducive to concentration than others. So ask yourself: how do you conceive this process of breathing in the body? Can you readjust your perception, readjust your label, readjust your little mental picture in there to make it even more useful?

This is when Ajaan Lee advises you to think of all the pores in your skin opening up. When you focus really clearly and distinctly on that perception of the pores opening up, they really do open up. This is one of the ways in which the brain communicates with itself, communicates with the body: through these images. So bit by bit you're beginning to isolate out the act of perception as you find perceptions that are more and more conducive to settling down: what the Buddha calls "calming mental fabrications."

That brings us to the aggregate of fabrication itself. These are the questions you ask yourself about the breath. Your intention to stay here is also a fabrication. Your intention to change the breath is a fabrication. The way you evaluate how things are going: That's a fabrication as well. The more clearly you can isolate these functions, the more skillfully you can do them.

And then there's consciousness, which is the awareness of all these things. Consciousness comes in different types. There's focused consciousness that spotlights specific sensations and mental activities, and then there's a background awareness that's already there throughout the body. When we talk about spreading your awareness, it's primarily a question of letting your spotlight concentration get in touch with the awareness already filling the body. This background awareness doesn't have to exert any pressure on anything at all. You learn how to separate this consciousness from, say, the earth and the water and the other things in the physical side of the body that you may have been confusing it with.

The more clearly you can isolate these things, the easier it is to figure out exactly what's going wrong when the mind is not settling down. You get more sensitive to any feelings, perceptions, or fabrications that might disturb your concentration. You get a better sense of how to handle those as well. In particular, you get more sensitive to that little process where there's a stirring somewhere in the body—which could either be physical or mental to begin with—but then you decide it's going to be a thought, so you place the label of "this is a thought about x" and then you allow it to grow in that particular direction. When the mind is really still, you can see this as it's happening. You can see it more clearly because you're intent on not allowing it to take over your concentration.

So it's through your mastery of these different processes of the aggregates that you can actually get the mind to settle down—which is why when the mind has settled down you can see these processes even more clearly and are ready to evaluate them for what they are. You can see things in these terms because you've had direct experience in separating them out in the process of getting the mind to settle down to begin with.

It's worth noting that the five aggregates are not among the teachings the Buddha picked up from other schools of thought that were taught by his contemporaries. The terms for "form," "feeling," and so on were already current in his time, but the idea of grouping them together as a set was original with him. And it's very directly related to the mastery of right concentration.

Ajaan Lee points this out. He says that when you're dealing with the breath, you're dealing with form. As the form begins to get more and more subtle until the breath stops, the mind begins to focus on space. The ease that comes with that feeling of space part of the aggregate of feeling. Then it goes to

consciousness. That's the aggregate of consciousness. Then there's nothingness, and you begin to recognize that the sense of "there's nothing" is a fabrication. Then there's the state of neither perception nor non-perception, which allows you to see how attenuated perception can be.

There's an image that Ajaan Lee uses in another context, but it applies here as well. Think of a rock containing different minerals. As you apply effort to your concentration, it's like applying heat to the rock. When you hit the melting point for, say, tin or lead or silver or gold, each of those metals in the rock will flow out and separate on its own. You don't have to go sorting through the rock with a pick, saying, "This is a little bit of gold and this is a little bit of silver." They naturally separate out as you apply the heat.

In the same way, the activities of the aggregates all separate out as you get deeper and deeper into the formless stages of concentration. Now, the teachers of the Buddha's time were able to get into these stages, but he seems to have been the first to realize how useful it was to take these terms, the ability to separate out these processes, and run with them further.

This is why, when you've been practicing concentration and you're beginning to look at the issue of suffering, you begin to see more clearly how clinging to these five aggregates is what brings suffering about. You're clinging to any one of these five activities or any combination of them—because they *are* activities. We call them aggregates, which makes them sound like a pile of gravel, but they're not. They're just different conglomerations of activities or processes. When the mind has been in concentration, you can begin to see, "This is where there's stress," say, around aging, illness, death, birth, or wherever else the mind feels stress. The stress is there because you've been clinging to these different activities. This means that you shift your focus away from the aging or whatever, and direct it toward watching these activities in action—the same activities you've been engaging in to get the mind to settle down. The more clearly you can see these activities and their direct connection to suffering and stress, then the easier it is to let them go.

So when you find yourself running up against problems in the meditation—a sense of discomfort in the body or some sloppiness in maintaining your focus—ask yourself: Which of these activities have you not been able to isolate out? Which ones are you confusing or glomming together in an unskillful way? The more easily you can isolate them out, then the more efficient your concentration is going to be, the more solid it's going to be, and the better it's going to be as

a foundation for gaining even deeper insights.

The Limits of Control

August 19, 2009

They say they've found that when they stimulate a certain part of your brain, you can feel a very strong sense of oneness; your sense of boundary between yourself and the world outside dissolves. There's a very satisfying sense that you're one with everything you're aware of. Of course, this doesn't mean you really are one. The brain is just sending that signal. The question is: What use is that perception? If you're feeling one with things, can you change them to be better? Can you exert control over them? And even though there may be a sense of wellbeing that comes with that oneness, how lasting is it?

The Buddha himself pointed out that the highest sense of oneness is the sense of consciousness being totally one and single, when everything in the range of your consciousness becomes one. But, he said, even in that sense of oneness, there is inconstancy. There is stress. It's not totally under your control.

He also said that the idea that you are one with the world, or you're one with the cosmos, is the most ridiculous self-view there is. After all, if you are one with something, or it really is you, you should be able to control it, get it to do what you want. All you have to do is think, and there it goes: It changes in line with the thought. And if something is you, then it's also going to be yours. If you're at one with everything, then the piece of land next to ours is yours. The cars in the parking lot are yours. Everything that comes along should be yours. But it's not. Try to go and exert your ownership over land or the cars, and a lot of people will fight you off.

So the sense of oneness may be a nice state of concentration, a very relaxing sense of wellbeing, but beyond that, it doesn't really mean anything. It doesn't have any truth value, and it's certainly not the end of suffering.

A more useful way of looking at your sense of self is looking at where you do exert control. Ajaan Suwat once made a comparison between two of the passages we chant here regularly. On the one hand, there's the passage we chanted just now: *Anabhissaro:* there is no one in charge. *Assako loko,* the world has nothing of its own, which means there is nothing of *your* own either, nothing worthy of calling you or yours. But we also have another chant, *Kammassakomhi,* I'm the owner of my actions. Your actions are yours. As

Ajaan Suwat said, think about that. There's a very useful teaching in that paradox. We do have the power to exert control over our intentions right now. And our intentions do shape our experience of the world around us, the world inside us, at least to some extent: enough to make the difference between suffering and not suffering.

What we're experiencing right now is the result of past intentions, plus our current intentions, plus the results of our current intentions. Even though we may not have absolute control over things, and will ultimately have to let them all go, we do have some control over our actions now. And you want to make the most of that fact. You want to be able to fabricate a path to the end of suffering out of your intentions, while you have the ability to do so, because ultimately there comes a point where you have to let go of everything here, and go on to who knows where.

So what we are doing as we're meditating is to find out exactly how much control we can exert over form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. This is the point of all the aspects of the practice. Generosity, for instance: One of your first experiences of freedom is when you have something that's yours, but you decide you want to give it away, not because you have to or you're expected to, but simply because you want to share it with someone else. That's your first sense that you're not totally a slave to your desires, totally a slave to your greed. You're free to say No to them, and a higher pleasure comes as a result. This is a very skillful way to exercise control.

The same with the precepts: You can say No to your desire to harm someone else, No to your desire to harm yourself, No even to actions that seem pleasant in the short-term but in the long-term cause harm.

Then there's the useful sense of control, the skillful sense of control, when you're practicing concentration. You're taking those five aggregates and basically pushing against what they call the three characteristics. Push against *aniccam:* See how constant you can make your mind. Push against *dukkham:* See what sense of pleasure you can create out of your sense of the body, out of your present awareness. Push against *anatta:* How much can you control the mind to stay with the object of your concentration? Push against the envelope. You find that you can create a sense of greater constancy than you have in any other way, a greater pleasure than you've experienced for many other things, greater control over your mind.

This is not only to give the mind a pleasant dwelling place, but also to develop more mindfulness and more discernment. It's easier to be mindful when your sense of the breath in the body feels really good. It's easier to stay with it for long periods of time. So you want to take advantage of that. It's easier to see things clearly when everything in the mind is very still. Like the water in a lake: If the water is still, you can see clearly what's in the bottom of the lake. If it's stirred up by the wind, if there's too much movement on the surface, if there's a strong current in the lake that gets it muddied, then even though there may be the same stones and everything else that's under the water when it's clear, you can't see them through the water. But if you allow the mind to settle down and be still, things become a lot clearer. You can see the subtle movements of the mind: where its movements cause stress, where they don't cause stress, or at least where they reduce the amount of stress you've been experiencing.

So in this practice, we're pushing against those characteristics of inconstancy, stress, and not-self, all for a good purpose. It allows us to gain the wisdom that ultimately goes beyond them. As I was saying last night, you do develop a healthy sense of self as you pursue the practice. You do get a greater sense of control—but you have to make sure it stays healthy. Avoid the unhealthy senses of self that can develop around the practice. As the Buddha says, don't go comparing yourself, saying, "My practice is better than other people's practice." Or, "I'm a better person than they are because my practice is better than theirs." That's not helpful at all. What is helpful is that you begin to gain a healthier sense of wellbeing, a greater insight into what's going on in the mind, by pushing it in the direction of concentration.

Ultimately you find that things push back. The mind can be made only so constant through concentration. After all, the element of intention that keeps it going is something you have to keep fabricating again and again and again. And even though it's relatively useful, there's a still an element of stress simply in that fact.

That's when you run up against the limits of how far you can control these things. But if you hadn't been trying to exert that control, you wouldn't see exactly where the line between controllable and uncontrollable lies. And you wouldn't see the subtleties of the stress that very refined control contains.

This is one way you can induce a sense of dispassion, disenchantment: that no matter how good it gets—and this *is* as good as it gets, in terms of

fabricating a sense of wellbeing—it's still not totally sure. It's still not totally solid or constant. Now, some people might give up at this point and say, "If this is as good as it gets, I have to satisfy myself here." But the Buddha was not that kind of person. He had tried to see if there is some way to touch the unconditioned, and he found that there was, by developing these things as far as they can go and then letting them go. Think of the old image of climbing up the top of the pole and letting go. You find that you don't fall, because you've let go not only of the pole, but also of gravity. You've let go of time and space.

That's something you can't control, but it doesn't matter at that point because it doesn't need to be controlled. It doesn't need to be fashioned. You don't have to keep working at it. It has nothing to do with parts of the brain being stimulated or not being stimulated. It lies outside of that dimension. And although you might say there's a oneness, it's a different kind of oneness. It's not based on perception; it's based on total unlimitedness.

So as you work at the practice here, try to be very clear about where your sense of control is. That's where your sense of self is to going to be found, to the extent that you're creating a self. If it's a self based around the skills you develop in the practice, it's actually useful. It's not sentimental. It's not based on some abstract idea. It's based on your skill level, so you want to expand your skills so they can lead you to greater happiness and finally to the point where you don't need those skills anymore. That's when the whole issue of control gets set aside. The whole issue of self and not-self gets set aside. But you get there by exploring exactly how much control you can gain over the aggregates, how much control you can gain over your actions, and by pushing them in as skillful a direction as you can.

Staying, Moving, & Neither

December 28, 2010

If you were to boil all the issues of concentration practice down to the most basic one, they'd come down to the question of when to stay in place and when to move. The next level up, when you're going to stay in place, is how do you do it? How do you get the mind to settle in? And when you move, how do you move in a way that doesn't obscure things? In other words, there are times when you simply want to stay with one object and get everything to settle down around that object, and other times when you want to question, look into something, allow some thoughts to come into the mind and see where they go, so that you can understand the processes of the mind.

The same principle applies to the body. When you're sitting in meditation, there are times when pain comes up. How do you know when it's time to stay with the pain and when it's time to move? Part of the answer lies in learning how to use the breath. When you're working with the breath here, it's like doing bodywork. There are basically two kinds of bodywork. The more aggressive style tries to straighten you out right now. It pulls you here, bends you there, forces the body into a better alignment. The other style is more indirect: just placing the body in a particular position where it will naturally release and relax into alignment, rather than being forced there.

When you're working with the breath, the second approach is your primary focus. You want your posture to be straight. You want the organs of your body not to be scrunched up against one another. But if you try too hard to straighten things out, you can actually damage yourself. Remember, we're working with breath *energy* here. As Ajaan Fuang used to say again and again, this is the key to our skill here. An crucial part of that skill lies in learning to distinguish the breath energy from the other properties of the body—and from the feelings it creates—and to work primarily with the breath.

Now, the breath is subtle. Sometimes we feel that we suck it into little sacks in the body and then squeeze it back out. Well, that's air. That's not the breath. The breath is the energy flow, and it doesn't have any clear edges. There's no clearly demarcated area where this is the breath, this is not the breath. Breath energy actually suffuses everything in the body and it can flow unimpeded, even through the solid parts. The liquid property is what gets

impeded by the solid parts. But the breath can go anywhere.

So when the alignment of the body doesn't seem quite right, think of this totally unbounded energy, unbounded in the sense that it has no spatial boundaries. It can go anywhere, do anything. Allow that sense of unboundedness to realign things, so that you're not pushing and pulling, because sometimes the pushing and pulling can do damage. Simply open and allow, and once you're there with that kind of energy, it's a lot easier for the mind to settle down in a way that doesn't require a lot of effort, a lot of exertion.

This is one of the problems with reading the texts too much. We get a lot of preconceived ideas of what the mind should be doing, what phases it should be going through. Then we try to squeeze it into those phases. You can squeeze it in for a while, but after a while you run out of energy. And if you think of anything that's been squeezed into a confining place, you realize it can get all distorted, which is not what you want. You work on the causes and let the effects take care of themselves.

In terms of the concentration, the causes are three. You direct your thoughts to the breath; you evaluate the breath; and you try to stay with the breath as your single preoccupation. That's all you have to worry about. There are times when you'll find that your conception of the breath gets confused, as in the tendency to confuse the breath energy with the liquid energy in the body. When liquid runs up against obstacles, it can't go through. It gets squeezed in. It builds up pressure. But the breath doesn't have to be squeezed in. Yet when we start breathing as if it were, that creates problems.

So, remember: It's totally free to go anywhere at all, all the time. The neat boundaries we place around it are artificial. Learn to erase them and see what happens. As for the pleasure or rapture you want, that will happen on its own. You can squeeze it, you can force it, but squeezed and forced pleasure is not going to last very long. It's like squeezing a piece of fruit to make it ripe. You know that ripe fruits are supposed to be soft, so you squeeze your piece of fruit, squeeze it and squeeze it until it's soft, but that doesn't ripen it. You just get mush. The right way is to leave the fruit on the tree, water the soil, make sure there are no insects eating your fruit, and give the tree some fertilizer. In other words, you focus your attention on the roots, and the fruits take care of themselves. And for the time being, you don't want to go anywhere else.

This is where the principle of staying comes in. We're creating a state of

becoming here, a state of mind. As the Buddha said, that requires a desire, because desire is the basic seed around which everything else grows. The seed has to be located in a certain place. So we're locating things in the breath, locating things here in the body, here in the present moment. Our desire is to stay here. In doing so, we learn a lot about the process of becoming: how the mind creates these worlds by creating a world that has reference to the present, that's solidly still, and that enables us to see the other worlds as they begin to form. This allows us to see that we have the choice to go with them or not.

All too often the choice is almost automatic. A thought comes up and you jump right in and ride off without looking to see who's driving, where they're planning to go. And so one of the important skills in the meditation is learning how not to move along with the thoughts. A thought will shoot out, and you don't have to get involved. You stay right here with the breath. When you can make that separation, you see that the thoughts shoot out for a little ways and then just fall. Like the old legend of the hilltribe chieftain in northern Thailand back in the seventh century: He had fallen in love with the queen who had come up from the central plains to the city of Lamphun, where she established her kingdom. He sent his emissaries to propose marriage, so she asked them, "What does your chieftain look like?" They were scrawny little hill tribesmen and they said, "Well, he looks just like us." She wasn't interested. But then the chieftain proposed through his emissaries that he would stand on his mountain, which was 30–40 miles away, and throw three spears. If any of the spears landed in the city, she would be his wife. If they didn't, he'd abandon his request. She figured that there was no way he was going to get the spears that far, so she agreed.

So he chanted his magical charms and threw his first spear, and it almost got into the city. This was when the queen became concerned. So she created a hat for him out of her clothing. She put her own charm on it and then sent it to him. And he thought, "Ah, this is a sign she has changed her mind." So he put the hat on. As he got ready to throw the next spear, he tried to do his magical chants, but they had no power. The spear just went up in the air and came right down. Didn't go anywhere at all.

Most of our thoughts are like that. They have magical power because we give them the power that allows them to go miles and miles. We jump right in and we keep them going. So one of the skills we're learning here is to deprive them of their magical power, to see that they're simply constructs. If you don't

jump in with them, if you're not maintaining them, they don't go very far.

So the big issues in concentration are how to get the mind into position and how to keep it there, at the same time allowing it to see. This is important, because there are types of concentration where you just blank out. You're still, but you're not learning anything. The whole point of this is to put you in a position where the mind is still and clear and can see things within its depths, like fish in a pool of clear water. Whatever is going to move, you can see it, but you're not moving along with it, unless you see that it is a necessary thought, something you've really got to think through. "Okay," you say, "we're going to move with this, we're going to go with it. And when we've finished our work with it, we'll come back here."

So it's not that we shut the mind down totally and leave it there. As the Buddha said, when you gain full control over your thoughts, it means you can think when you want to think and not think when you don't. You've got the choice—instead of just willy-nilly riding along with whatever comes by. You're in a position where you can see which things are worth thinking, and how a lot of things are not.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has us learn how to question our assumptions, because our assumptions are what pull us into a lot of thoughts. This is also why he teaches so much about questioning. One of the main lessons he teaches is that some questions are simply not worth answering, because the dichotomies they set up are false, either because the issue itself is just a non-issue, or because there are more alternatives than just the two.

So when the Buddha talks about gaining insight through investigation, this is part of it: learning the process of questioning. When you set up a question, how are you predetermining the answer? When you can see that, you learn how to step outside of the questions. There is that famous exchange that Ajaan Chah had when a woman in England asked him—according to one version of the story—about what happens to people who go to nirvana. Do they still exist? Do they not exist? Nobody had ever been able to answer this question to her satisfaction. He replied that neither alternative applied and he gave the image of the candle to explain why. When the candle is burning, you can talk about the flame: what shape it has, what color it has. When it's not burning, you can't talk about its shape or color anymore. And it's the same with the person who has attained nirvana. You can't talk about whether they exist or not, because they're no longer burning. Then he asked her if that answer satisfied her, and

she said, No. She wasn't satisfied with his answer. He said, "In that case, I'm not satisfied with your question." Which in one way is startling, because usually the person who asks the question is the one who has the power to say, "This answer satisfies me, this one doesn't." This is how the mind traps itself. It sets up questions, sets up dichotomies and makes them authoritative, and it ends up demanding answers that keep it trapped.

So one of the skills you want to develop as a meditator is how not to fall into that trap. You have to question the question, to learn which questions are worth riding with and which ones are not, because questions have a huge shaping influence on the rest of your thoughts. In other words, you get to decide which questions—and which motivations for setting up the question—are satisfactory, and which are not.

Ultimately, it turns out that this dichotomy between moving and staying still is a false dichotomy, too. There comes a point when the mind is fully trained in learning how to stay still and it realizes that the one issue remaining is its attachment to staying still. But you don't want to run off moving either. So you're trapped, as long as you see that those are the only alternatives. As long as you see things in terms of mind states with a location—like your state of becoming, centered around that particular desire, that particular intention—then all of your choices come down to whether you're going to stay with this intention or move to another one.

But when the mind is still enough and sharp enough, it comes to see that there is another alternative. This is why the Buddha said, in the dimension where suffering ends, there is no coming, there is no going, and no staying in place. When that deva asked him how he crossed the stream, he said he crossed by neither moving forward nor staying in place. He left it at that and didn't explain it because he wanted the deva to realize that there was more to the mind than what the deva had presupposed. He wanted to subdue her pride. But for us as we're meditating, we find that this is one of the serious questions hovering over the practice as we get closer and closer to gaining real insight: What are the alternatives aside from moving and staying in place?

Ajaan Lee once said we have a tendency to see the big issues as the big abstractions, all the technical vocabulary, as high-level Dhamma, whereas the simple business of learning how to keep the mind still is low-level Dhamma. But that, he said, is wrong. We've got it all backwards. Looking at the basics again and again and again: That's where the real high-level work gets done.

That will enable you ultimately to see what that other alternative is. That’s a lot of the practice right there.

A Mind Without Inertia

February 13, 2010

The texts tell us that when the Buddha was newly awakened, he surveyed the world. On the one hand, he saw how everyone was aflame with passion, aversion, and delusion, burning from these things, and he felt compassion. But then he reflected on the Dhamma he had discovered. He was struck by how much it went against what people would want to hear, how subtle it was, how hard it would be for them to understand. He almost gave up on the idea of teaching. It was only after a Brahma's invitation—and the Buddha's own reflection that there would be people who would understand—that he taught.

Notice the dynamic there. There was the compassion, but there was also the realization that it was going to be very difficult. He needed to be convinced that the effort was worthwhile. That was why he taught.

One of the main problems he faced was that the fire burning away in our minds is something we really like—in particular the fire of passion. When the Buddha says that we're attached to sensuality, it's not so much sensual *things* that we're attached to. We're attached to passion for sensual *thoughts,* our obsession with sensual thoughts. We love to think about sensual pleasures. If we can't get one sensual pleasure, well, we're happy to think about another one. But we're really attached to the thinking, even though it makes us suffer. We think of passion as a good thing. A lot of people say, how could you live without passion?

Think about that for a minute. What does that mean? We need the oomph of passion to overcome an awful lot of inertia. To live is to struggle. We have to feed; we have to provide for the needs of the body. This is one the reasons why we're taught to repeat the contemplation of the requisites every evening: We have this need for food, clothing, shelter, medicine. If the body were perfectly complete, we wouldn't need these things. But we're born with a big lack, a whole flurry of needs. Our parents provide for us when we're young, but there comes a point where we have to provide for ourselves. And it's not easy.

And it's not just our own effort that goes into providing for ourselves. There's a lot of suffering on the part of other people, other beings, that goes into the fact that we need food to eat. Even if we were all vegetarians, farmers would still have to work at growing the food, transport workers would still

have to bring the food from the farm to market, people would still work in the market, people would still have to cook: All these people would be involved in a lot of effort.

This holds not just for food, but also for clothing, shelter, medicine. There's a long chain of suffering that goes into providing these things. Yet even when the body is fully provided with these things, it's still full of aches and pains. The pains of hunger hit every day, and things get worse as you get older. Things break down without asking your permission or giving advanced warning. This part begins to wear down. That part begins to wear down. You find yourself with less and less to work with. It gets harder and harder to be up and running. To get over the barrier of that inertia takes a fair amount of passion, which is why we see passion as a good thing. But it's a fire that keeps burning away.

The Buddha had a twofold solution to all of this. One is to direct the passion in a skillful direction, learning to get the mind motivated for things that really are helpful, that really do lead to a truly lasting happiness. For the most part, our passions are totally misguided. So the Buddha said to focus your passion in the direction of the Dhamma. Find the happiness that comes from generosity, the happiness that comes from virtue, from being principled in your behavior, and the happiness that comes from meditation. He compares these things to food—and particularly the sense of wellbeing, rapture, and refreshment that come from getting the mind into a good strong concentration. That's your food and nourishment on the path. It gives you energy. At the same time, his various teachings on the things that can be attained as we practice provide the motivation that gives you the passion for the Dhamma, that helps overcome the inertia that otherwise would keep you from practicing.

Beyond that, the Buddha's ultimate solution to the problem is to totally get rid of that inertia, the baggage that weighs the mind down, that we have to fight against in order to accomplish anything. That's why he has us look at our attachments. The Pali word, *upadhi,* means baggage, and it derives from a term that nomads would use for all their tents and food and all their other belongings that they would pack on their horses when they picked up and moved on. All your mental belongings are called *upadhi:* the baggage you carry around with you, the extra weight that creates that dead sense of inertia.

This is why we have to look very carefully into the mind, why we practice concentration to give the mind a place where it can see very clearly the steps

by which it functions, by which it creates these burdens, this massive load of baggage it's holding onto. Your greed, your aversion, and your delusion, identifying with your body, identifying with your feelings, your perceptions, your thought fabrications, even with acts of consciousness: These things weigh the mind down if you hold on to them.

This is the Buddha's ultimate mode of attack when you see the mind holding onto something. The phrase, "holding on," here, is metaphorical. The mind doesn't have hands that grab things, but it has habits that it keeps repeating over and over again. The places it goes to for its happiness, the things it does again and again and again—partly because it doesn't know any better, partly because it's habitual: Those repeated actions are your attachments. To repeat them is to hold on to them. When we begin to pry into our attachments, we begin to see what creates the mind's inertia. We also see how we can lighten the mind by learning how not to keep going after the ideas that weigh us down, that keep us back, or ways of functioning that keep us back. We let these things go by seeing that they're not worth the bother. They may provide a little pleasure, but that pleasure doesn't compare with the stress and pain they cause. That's why the Buddha has you focus on stress—in Ajaan Maha Boowa's words, the squeeze they put on the mind. They're dead weight on the mind. When you decide you'd rather let them go, the mind gets lighter and lighter. As a result, it has less and less need for passion, because there's less and less inertia for it to overcome.

To really comprehend the Buddha's teachings, to appreciate them, you have to think outside the box. When the Buddha says that the mind in nibbana no longer has to feed, it doesn't correspond to our ordinary ideas about pleasure and happiness. Our habitual way of looking for happiness is to keep feeding on sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas, relationships, intentions. And so when he talks about the mind not feeding, it sounds like it's being starved. What's actually happening is that the mind has arrived at such a strong place that it doesn't need to feed anymore.

The same with passion: We think a life without passion would be dead and dull because all we know is the inertia of the mind that, if it can't stir up passion, can't do anything. That, in our eyes, is a dead mind. But the Buddha was aware of a state of mind that doesn't have that inertia, that doesn't have that dead weight, and so it can do the wise thing, the helpful thing, the skillful thing, the compassionate thing, with no need for any passion to spur it on.

As we’re practicing, we have to bring passion to the practice because the mind still has its baggage, a lot of resistance that we have to overcome. That’s why the Buddha describes passion for the Dhamma as a good thing on the path. When you find that your efforts are getting slack, you do what you can to remind yourself of why you’re here practicing, what the alternative would be if there were no way of training the mind to free it from its burdens, to free it from its fires of passion, aversion, and delusion, the fevers that inflame the mind. By keeping yourself motivated in this way, you use the passion for the Dhamma to replace your other passions, to keep yourself on the path. As you become more and more passionately engaged in the Dhamma, you can see more and more clearly exactly where you’ve been weighing yourself down. You can drop all the weight. It’s like those old balloons that people used to travel in. They’d have big bags full of weights and when the balloon was ready to go up, they’d drop the weights, drop the weights, and the balloon would rise higher and higher.

The same with the practice: As the mind gets lighter and lighter, your passion gets more refined, and ultimately it’s totally weightless, totally free of inertia. That’s when you no longer need the passion.

It’s good to remember that there are a lot of things we value in life because of a lack. We value food because we feel hungry. We value passion because it helps us to overcome our inertia. But when the mind no longer needs to feed on things, it’s totally weightless. It looks at food and feels no inclination, for it doesn’t need it anymore. It looks at passion and sees it as the Buddha did: simply as a fever, from which he was glad to be freed.

Pissing on Palaces

April 9, 2010

A famous scholarly monk from Bangkok who was very skeptical about the Wilderness Tradition and about the possibility of getting anywhere in meditation once went to visit Ajaan Mun and asked him, "Here you are out in the forest, meditating all alone. Where do you go to listen to the Dhamma? I'm in Bangkok with famous Dhamma teachers all around and even then I come up with problems that I can't solve and they can't solve, either. So what hope do you have out here in the forest? Where can you listen to the Dhamma?" And Ajaan Mun's response was, "I hear the Dhamma all the time, 24 hours a day, except when I'm asleep." And the monk replied, "Well, that shows you know how to listen."

And it's true. The Dhamma's always proclaiming itself wherever you look —if you look in the right way, listen in the right way, if you tune into the fact that there is Dhamma being taught. Actually, it's not really taught, it's just the way things are. They simply show the way they are by their behavior. As Ajaan Mun said, you see a leaf fall, and it teaches you the principle of inconstancy, impermanence. You hear a monkey call, and what you hear is its pain and suffering. It's all around us.

When the Buddha referred to his teaching of the Dhamma and the Vinaya, he'd use different words for how he taught. The Vinaya was something he formulated. In other words, he had to put together the rules for there to be a Vinaya. But the Dhamma's something already there, and so he said that the Dhamma was something he simply pointed out. All he had to do was point it out so that people could see.

So this is a skill we have to develop: the ability to hear the Dhamma all the time, to see the Dhamma all the time, so we don't have to be dependent on somebody else to teach us the Dhamma, all the while wondering if the words are true or not. Of course, one of the problems is that we're surrounded in the West by people with lots of anti-Dhamma attitudes, and that includes a lot of Dhamma teachers. But that's the nature of human society in general. To tune into the Dhamma, you have to learn to tune out a lot of the messages that are being sent your way. And that requires a whole set of skills.

One is to make sure that your intention is skillful in what you do, say, and

think. This is why we recite those passages on the brahma-viharas every evening. It's not that we're praying to some god to make these things happen, that everybody be happy. And it's not that we believe that simply by wishing it, it's going to be so. As the Buddha once said, if things could be made true simply by wishing and praying, there wouldn't be any poor people, any sick people, any ill people in the world. Actually, the good things there are in the world are there because people have had good intentions and acted on those intentions.

So that's what we're doing as we develop goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity: We're working on our intentions to make sure that they're straight in line with the Dhamma. Just that much right there helps tune us in, because it focuses on the point that our actions are the important things in the world. What we're doing right here, right now: That's the most important thing—which is very different from the message that we get from everybody else. The news presented by the media is about what somebody else is doing someplace else: They tell us that that's more important and that you're just a loser sitting here watching TV or listening to the radio or on the web, absorbing what the real actors in the world are doing. Then you get sucked into the illusion that, "Well, maybe if I send out a message, I'll become an important actor, too."

But, actually, the really important things in your life are things that nobody else can know: what you're doing in your mind. This is important because what you do in the mind then becomes the basis for what you say, what you do, what you think. So that's one way to tune into the Dhamma.

When you see or hear anything that helps to support that, you know you're seeing and listening to the Dhamma. As for anything that pulls attention away from that, you know you're listening to something that's not Dhamma.

This is where you have to develop your equanimity, so you can detach yourself from anti-Dhamma ideas. You need compassion and goodwill so that your detachment doesn't become cold, indifferent, or hard-hearted. But you also need the detachment of equanimity so that you can step back a bit and not get sucked into the ways of the world. Because what do they have? They have gain and loss—and we've seen a lot of this recently: people doing things that they think are going to make them wealthy, to get ahead in life, and it turns out that they're just shooting themselves in the feet.

Then there are the things people do for status and praise but end up causing

a lot of suffering for themselves and for the people around them. The things they claim to do for the sake of love and compassion place burdens on the people they say they love. To look realistically at the human condition requires a strong sense of irony. Everybody's motivated by the desire for happiness, and yet look at what we do. We create more misery than any other species on the planet—and we're supposed to be the smartest species. So we need to step back a bit.

One of the things I appreciated most about Ajaan Fuang, especially when I first met him, was how, even though he was a Thai person, he seemed to be standing outside of Thai society. He wasn't swept up with the usual Thai cares and concerns. And this is typical of the Wilderness Tradition in general. It has roots way back in the Buddhist tradition. It's one of the reasons we come out into the wilderness: to get a separate sense of perspective so that we're not spinning around with everybody else. We're standing outside of the spinning.

We have to keep reminding ourselves that the things people run after are not really all that real, all that worthwhile. In Sri Lanka there are the remains of ancient forest monasteries and most of the remains are really plain. They were just brick buildings and all they have now are the brick foundations. One detail, though, was really elaborate: the stone panels in the urinals. They had bas-relief pictures of palaces on the back panels of the urinals so that the monks could piss on palaces every day. I suppose I should say that they were pissing with compassion but no, probably not. They were expressing their disdain, which I think is emblematic of an attitude that's really healthy. You look at all the things that people run after—power, wealth, fame, or as Twiggy once said, all the most horrible things in life. If that's what you're tuned into, you're not going to hear the Dhamma.

You've got to tune into other things. You have to tune into compassion, kindness—but not idiot compassion or idiot kindness. You have to train these qualities with discernment so that they don't provide cover for your defilements. This means that, primarily, you have to tune into heedfulness, the sense that your actions really are life-shaping and you've got to be careful how you act. You can't allow yourself to waste your time over things that are really no use at all. Because the question is, given that life is so short, what are you going to take with you?

When I was in New York last month, I gave a series of talks on not-self. In one of the talks I focused on the whole issue of rebirth and how rebirth was an

important teaching on not-self. Everyone looked kind of puzzled, because most people think of the idea of rebirth as the ultimate form of selfing: not only do you have a self in this life, but it also extends into the next. But the connection between rebirth and not-self comes in the sutta where Ven. Ratthapala's talking to King Koravya. The king had asked him, "Why did you ordain? Your family's healthy, you're healthy, you haven't suffered any loss. What would inspire you to go forth?" And Ratthapala said, among other things, that "The world has nothing of its own; one has to pass on leaving everything behind." And the king said, "Well, how can you explain that? I've got lots of wealth and I can take it wherever I go." And Ratthapala replied, "Can you take it with you when you die?" And the king had to admit, "Well, no. When I die, I have to leave everything behind." That's how death teaches not-self.

But it also teaches you that there are some things that do carry over, that you do take with you. You take your kamma; you take the qualities of mind you've developed. So you need to make sure that you've got some good qualities to take with you. What we're living for as meditators is to develop the qualities—in some cases they're called the noble treasures—of conviction, virtue, a sense of shame and compunction over the idea of doing something harmful, the willingness to learn, generosity, and wisdom. These are qualities of mind you can take with you, and you don't want to scrounge around for them at the last minute. Death is like being suddenly evacuated with no time to pack your bags. You find yourself swept to a new land, a new place, and all you have are your skill sets. So what skills sets have you been collecting?

Focus in on that, listen to that question, keep that question in mind because that's what enables you to hear the Dhamma in the other things you notice around you. You see other people and some of them are working on good skill sets, while others are working on who knows what: the skills of impatience, entitlement, overweening pride. When you look at them, you should ask yourself: "Is this something I want to take as a model for my behavior or is this something I have to learn from as a lesson in precisely what *not* to do?" When you do this, you're not passing judgment on the value of the person; you're looking at the person as a possible guide and deciding whether you want to take that person's actions as a guide to your own. It's not harsh and judgmental to look at people in this way. It's common sense.

And the Buddha never said that it was wrong to judge other people. I was reading a book recently that contained a supposed quote from the Pali Canon

where the Buddha says that if you judge other people, you destroy yourself by the root. This statement was even addressed to Ven. Ananda, to give it an air of truthiness. But the whole passage was an interpolation. The Buddha never said that. He actually said that you have to learn how to judge people wisely in terms of the skill or lack of skill in their actions. You need to do this for the purpose of deciding whether you want to take them as an example or not.

When you see other people who, through their greed and heedlessness, have destroyed their wealth, destroyed their status, destroyed the company they work for, you can take it as a warning signal: That's a Dhamma lesson right there. When you see someone who's found peace of mind: There's a Dhamma lesson right there, too.

The important thing is to detach yourself from the usual snares of the world. They dangle things in front of your face and lead you on so that you can't really hear the message of the Dhamma. It's like the cartoon in *The New Yorker* that shows people trudging along on a city street, each with a big stick coming up their back and hanging down in front of them, dangling a carrot in front of their faces. They all look pretty glum. And on the street, there's a guy driving his top-down sports-carrot down the road, smiling to himself. We're all going after those dangling carrots and that's why we don't really see the Dhamma around us.

So learn how to step back and put a question mark around the messages you're getting from the people around you, from the media, from whatever the source. Say, "Okay, is that a Dhamma lesson about what to do or about what *not* to do? There's got to be a Dhamma lesson in here somewhere." It's like tuning your radio. There are always different radio waves or different frequencies going through the air right now, going through your body right now. If you tune in to one frequency, you get classical music. If you tune in to another frequency, you get Tijuana. If you tune in to another, you get hate radio. It's all there in the air. The question is, to which frequency are you going to tune in? If you tune in properly, you tune in to the Dhamma because it's always there, too.

But it requires the right attitude: your desire to be skillful, to search for happiness in a way that embodies goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy, along with the equanimity that allows you to step back and question any non-Dhamma stations, any non-Dhamma frequencies you encounter. When you learn to tune in your mind just right, you find that the Dhamma is broadcasting, as Ajaan Mun said, 24 hours a day. It's there to listen to, it's there to see

whenever you want it—if you know how to listen, if you know how to look.

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.*

Deva: Literally, "shining one." An inhabitant of the terrestrial and heavenly realms higher than the human.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action. (2) A phenomenon in and of itself. (3) Mental quality. (4) Doctrine, teaching. (5) Nibbana (although there are passages in the Pali Canon describing nibbana as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *dharma.*

Jhana: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. Sanskrit form: *dhyana.*

Kamma: Intentional act. Sanskrit form: *karma.*

Khandha: Aggregate; heap; pile. The aggregates are the basic building blocks of describable experience, as well as the building blocks from which one's sense of "self" is constructed. There are five in all: physical form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, and consciousness. Sanskrit form: *skandha.*

Nibbana: Literally, the "unbinding" of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. Sanskrit form: *nirvana.*

Pali: The name of the earliest extant canon of the Buddha's teachings and, by extension, of the language in which it was composed.

Samvega: A sense of dismay, terror, or urgency.

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.*

Uposatha: Observance day—the days of the full moon, new moon, and half-moon—and the practices traditionally followed on those days. For Buddhist monks, these include meeting (on the full moon and new moon days) to hear the recitation of the Patimokkha, the basic code of monastic discipline. For Buddhist lay people, these practices include observing the eight precepts: against killing, stealing, sexual intercourse, lying, taking intoxicants, eating during the period from noon to the following dawn, watching shows and decorating the body, and using high and luxurious beds and seats.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline.

Wat (Thai): Monastery.

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