



MEDITATIONS₈

Meditations₈

Dhamma Talks

by

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cover

Valley of Fire, Nevada

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 book, *With Each & Every Breath*. If you are not familiar with these instructions, you might want to read through them before reading the talks in this book. Additional Dhamma talks are available at www.accesstoinsight.org and www.dhammatalks.org.

* * *

As with the previous volumes in this series, I would like to thank Bok Lim Kim for making the recording of these talks possible. She, more than anyone else, is responsible for overcoming my initial reluctance to have the talks recorded. I would also like to thank the following people for transcribing the talks and/or helping to edit the transcriptions: James Babbitt, Cormac Brown, Thomas Cleary, Satarupa Das, Lori Elling, Virginia Lawrence, Marilyn Lemon, Claude Le Ninan, Yam Marcovic, Carol McDonald, Addie Onsanit, Barbara Pereira, Isabella Trauttmansdorff, and Antony Woods; Vens. Balaggo Bhikkhu and Vijjakaro Bhikkhu. May they all be happy.

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Free to Choose

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One of the Buddha's insights on the night of his awakening was that the universe just goes around and around, life goes around and around, sometimes up, sometimes down. Where it comes from, he says, is inconceivable, and it's capable of going on continually as long as there's craving. As long as there's consciousness that feeds on craving, which gives rise to more craving, the process can just keep on going indefinitely. It's not going anywhere in particular and it doesn't serve any purpose.

Now, that insight can be depressing if you think about it in one way, but it's liberating if you think about it in another way: that you're not here to serve a part of some larger universal purpose. You can give your own meaning to your life. You're free to choose what you want to do with your life, what you want to do with the abilities you have.

The way the Buddha used that realization was to focus in on the problem of suffering. We each of have our own sufferings. They're part of our experience that we don't share with anyone else. You can sit and look at somebody suffer, and you can feel sympathy for them, but you don't actually feel their pain. And no one else can feel your pain.

The Buddha's basic message is that you can focus on that pain and suffering as a worthwhile issue, and on getting rid of that pain as a worthwhile goal. Other people may say that you should hang around and help them with whatever issues they want to deal with in the world, but the Buddha said you don't have to. You can deal with your main issue: You can put a total end to your suffering, and find total happiness. It would be nice if we could clean up everybody else's sufferings for them, but we can't. Each person's suffering is the result of his or her own lack of skill: That's one of the meanings of avijja.

You can't make other people skillful, but you can develop skills on your own and you can use those skills to deal with this issue, because each of us does have this area of our awareness that nobody else can know.

You look at the blue sky, and everybody agrees that the sky is blue, but how do you know that other people's blue is the same as your blue? Even something as basic as that we don't share. That's not really a big issue, of course, but the big issue inside this area of your awareness is the fact that

you are suffering, and the mind is causing itself to suffer, and yet the suffering isn't necessary. The Buddha is saying that you're free to learn how to put an end to it, you can devote your time to putting an end to it, and it's an honorable use of your time. It's an honorable thing to get out of this cycle of unskillfulness and suffering, regardless of how much the world may tell us that we have to hang around and help them with their issues or their causes or whatever.

If you want to be generous, you can help, but there comes a point where all the causes you might fight for can't help you when aging comes, when illness comes, when death comes. And the Buddha is saying, "Go ahead. You are free to focus on how to solve that issue so that when aging, illness, and death come, you won't suffer."

That's an independence that's really worthwhile.

So look what you're doing right now. See what you're doing that's unskillful, that's causing unnecessary stress, unnecessary suffering, and work on that—remembering that if you keep on coming back, you may be able to help people with some things, but you're also putting a burden on others.

To begin with, you're putting a burden on your parents. One of the traditional parts of an ordination in Thailand is a chant before the ordination ceremony that sometimes can go on for hours—depending on how much the parents want to hear it—teaching the young naga, the young monk-to-be, about all the sufferings that his mother went through in raising him. Most of the chant deals with the sufferings she endured while she was pregnant with him. This is to give rise to a sense of gratitude and a desire to help pay her back. One of the ways to repay that debt traditionally is to ordain and to dedicate the merit to her.

But the chant should also be an incentive to say to yourself, "I don't want to come back because I'm going to cause pain to somebody else. Somebody is going to have to carry me around in her womb for nine months."

Think of all the time and energy that parents give to raising their children. This thought can give rise to a sense of gratitude but it also gives rise to a sense of samvega.

When the Buddha talks about how many mothers you've had, he said that it's hard to find someone who hasn't been your mother at some point, it's hard to find someone who hasn't been your father, someone who hasn't been your son or daughter, brother, sister. We've all been through this in all the various combinations many, many, many times. And as he says, the proper reaction to that is to want to get out. You want to find release from

this, because it's oppressive when you think about it.

Today I was looking at the Internet. Tricycle has put my article on samvega online, and one of the comments was, "This is why Mahayana had to develop, to get past this very narrow view that the world is suffering. After all, surely the pleasures of walking in the woods and sipping a cup of tea are not temporary pleasures." I read that and I kept thinking, "This must be a satire. How can anyone sincerely think like this?"

If you think that this is what life is all about, that this is all there is and you might as well just learn how to accept it—well, that's one way of looking at it, but it's not the wisest. The Buddha said, No, you don't have to accept this. You don't have to come back. You are free to put an end to this suffering that you feel and that nobody else can feel for you and nobody else can take away for you.

People can soothe the pain a little bit, but when you're really suffering, the only things that are going to get you past it are the skills you learn. You learn the skills of vijja so that you replace the avijja that causes suffering, and the Buddha is offering to teach you those skills. He sets them out and says very clearly, "This is how it's done." Some of the instructions are easy to follow, others are hard to follow, but they're all worthwhile.

You know the analogy he gives: If you could make a deal that every morning for 100 years they would stab you with 100 spears and every noon they would stab you with another 100 spears and every evening another 100 spears—300 spears a day for 100 years, but you'd be guaranteed awakening at the end—he said it would be a deal worth making. You wouldn't even feel that the awakening came through hardship. The freedom that comes, the sense of total relief that comes when you're past suffering, is that valuable and all-encompassing.

Even with just stream entry: He says that the amount of suffering left for someone who's a stream enterer is like a little bit of dirt under your fingernail, as compared to the dirt in the entire earth, which is like the amount of suffering left for those who haven't reached that point.

That's a lot of suffering.

So this is our independence: our ability to focus on this part of our awareness that we don't share with anyone else, and to straighten it out so that we don't have to feel the suffering that weighs each of us down.

It's an independence with a double meaning. One, you are free to focus on this issue. The universe doesn't have any larger purpose for you to which you have to subsume your desire for happiness in service of some larger purpose. And two, when you master these skills, you really are free. There's

nothing that weighs the mind down at all.

From that point forward, what you have left in life you can give to others, to help them learn these skills as well. That's the kindest thing you can do. This is why we pass these things on. We've found the value that comes from following the Buddha's teachings and we want to preserve them so that other people can find that value as well.

So for this hour, you're free to focus on the problem you find inside. These opportunities don't come easily. All too often, we have lots of other responsibilities in the world, but at the moment you've got this freedom, so make the most of it.

What We Have in Common

December 21, 2016

We come from lots of different backgrounds. What holds us together is our desire to practice the Dhamma.

A couple of years after Ajaan Fuang passed away, a group of people came from Bangkok and asked me if Ajaan Fuang had done any amazing, miraculous things while he was alive. They were hoping to hear about his psychic powers—his ability to read minds, his foreknowledge of events, that kind of thing. And although I could have told them plenty of stories on those topics, I thought it would be more useful to tell them something even more amazing: that—even though he was Thai and I was American—when we communicated, the fact that he was Thai and I was an American didn't seem to matter. It was always just one human being to another. I thought that was amazing.

And that wasn't true just with Ajaan Fuang. The people who came to the monastery—especially when we were working together on building the chedi, building the Buddha image—had a very strong sense of extended family, a lot of camaraderie, a lot of fellowship, and I was simply part of the family. But as I got to know the people, I began to realize that, when we weren't working on Dhamma projects or talking about the Dhamma, when they started talking about their backgrounds, they were all coming from places and attitudes very foreign to me, not only in terms of their culture, but also in terms of their social and economic status. They were people with whom I otherwise would have probably never connected. But the fact that we were able to step out of our backgrounds and look at them from the point of view of the Dhamma made all of the differences okay and understandable—familiar, even—because everybody was willing to step out.

This is what the Dhamma does. It helps us step out of our culture. Ajaan Mun's favorite teaching was the customs of the noble ones. He was accused of not following traditional Thai customs, or traditional Lao customs, and in response he'd always say, "Those are the customs of people with defilement"—a comment that applies to any country's customs. He was interested in putting an end to suffering, which meant becoming a noble one, and to do that required that he follow the customs of the noble ones, the culture of the noble ones.

After all, the problem of suffering is pre-cultural. Even before we know we have a culture, we're already experiencing pain, getting upset over physical pain and mental pain. As soon as we start coming out of the womb, there it is: pain. It's a problem we've been relating to ever since. So the extent to which we focus on that as our priority is what brings us together regardless of our backgrounds.

The Buddha did have an appreciation of diversity, but the kind of diversity he appreciated was that of diverse talents. He gave a list of his pre-eminent monk-, nun-, layman-, and laywoman- disciples, pointing out the distinctive talents or virtues of each. Each had something distinctive to offer to the group—in terms of wisdom, harmoniousness, or the sacrifices he or she made on the path. But it was all for the same purpose, which added to the honor of the group as a whole.

So here we are, coming from many different backgrounds ourselves: different parts of the world, different strata of society. What brings us together is the fact that we have a common aspiration, a common goal. We focus on the Buddha's analysis of suffering, which is the same for everybody. He focused on what we all have in common, in terms of why we're suffering. We may be clinging to different things, but the clinging itself is the problem, not the things. And the dynamic of clinging and the dynamic of putting an end to it is the same for everybody. There are minor differences in terms of the particulars of your clinging, and these are things that we all have to work out for ourselves. But the basic structure is the same.

That was the Buddha's genius. He came from a particular stratum of society: Indian society, the noble warrior class. But his analysis of suffering, the causes of suffering, and the end of suffering was not limited to India or the noble warrior caste. It was simply a matter of how the mind, every mind, works. So as we focus on this, it's what keeps us working together, belonging together.

The Buddha talked about how a group can stay together. We look at our society now and everything seems to be tearing apart. It's good to think about how we can put it back together. There are six qualities in all. The first three have to do with goodwill. The Buddha could have stated all of them simply as one factor, goodwill, but I think he wanted to emphasize goodwill, goodwill, goodwill. This is what underlies everything: a wish for true happiness, a wish that everybody can find true happiness, a happiness that harms no one. So, one, you express goodwill in your actions. Two, you express goodwill in your words. Three, you express goodwill in your

thoughts. As long as we're extending thoughts of goodwill to one another, it's a lot easier to live together, to sympathize with one another's desire for happiness across our cultural differences.

The fourth quality is generosity. If you have something to share, you share it with the group. This creates a sense of camaraderie. I have a student who, years back, was living up northwestern Thailand, out in the woods. And there was a sizable group of monks scattered around in the woods. Once every month or so, someone would come and bring provisions for them. And as long as everybody was sharing, they were happy. But they found out that the monk who was looking after the storehouse for the provisions was holding extra portions all for himself. And immediately, there was conflict in the group because of that. So the lesson is, when you have something to share, you give it. That's what creates and cements a bond of fellowship.

Then the last two qualities are holding virtue in common and right view in common. As long as we're all holding by the precepts, we can all trust one another. When we're not lying or sneaking off with things, it's so much easier to live with one another.

The same with having views in common: We start with the views of the Buddha's teachings on kamma, that you do have choices as to how to act, and that different actions have different consequences, based on the quality of the intention behind the action. So you want to be careful about how you act. That's the essence of right view right there. It doesn't require that you be Buddhist in order to believe it. I've run into some nominal Buddhists who thought that their actions were totally determined by their genes, which means that deep down inside they don't feel that they're responsible for what they do. It's hard to live with someone who thinks like that. If you want to live together, you have to admit, "I do make choices and my choices are going to have consequences, so I'd better be careful." As long as everybody shares that view together, we can live with one another.

Basically, what it comes down to is that we all have the same goal in common—we're trying to head to the same place, to the end of suffering—and the same basic ideas of what's required to get there.

The Buddha talks about people who are born in darkness; people who are born in brightness, people who go in darkness, and people who go in brightness. He works out all the permutations: i.e., you can come in darkness and go in darkness, come in darkness and go in brightness, come in brightness and go in darkness, or come in brightness and go in brightness. Coming in darkness means starting out life in a situation where

the family is poor, it's not educated, and it holds to wrong view. In other words, you're born into really difficult circumstances as far as your ability to find and practice the Dhamma. Coming in brightness is when the circumstances are easy. But there are people born in brightness who go in darkness. In other words, they behave in ways that are going to pull them down. And there are people who are born either in brightness or darkness who are going in the bright direction: observing the precepts, training the mind. And that's what matters: where you're going, not where you're coming from. As the Buddha said, his teaching is essentially a path. And the image of the path means basically that: We're going someplace. The goal is what matters.

Even as we're sitting here focusing on the present moment, it's not just the present moment that's at stake here. What comes afterwards is at stake as well. There are ways of finding happiness in the present moment that are going to be okay for the present but they're going to turn into something else down the line. You don't want those. Sometimes there's pain in the present moment, but you learn how to relate to it in the proper way, so that it actually leads to something good down the line.

So the question always is, where do these things go? That's what we're focusing on. And having a sense that we're all heading in the same direction is what enables us to live with one another. We're all trying to put an end to suffering. We're trying to see our sufferings, the particulars of our sufferings within the framework that the Buddha provided. We have that common framework that enables us to live with the differences in where we come from so that even though they're there, they don't get in the way. We're not trying to obliterate them, but ultimately, they don't matter because we're focusing on something that matters more, something that everyone has in common: We're all suffering from our own actions and we all want to learn how not to do that.

We realize that our suffering from our own actions doesn't stop just with us. It makes us a burden on other people, too. This is why practicing the Dhamma is a gift, both to ourselves and other people. It's one of those forms of generosity that allows us to live together so that our differences don't scrape up against one another. And as for whatever special talents we may have to offer to the group, to offer to the practice, they're all welcome because we're all headed in the same direction.

For Your Benefit Here & Now

August 5, 2015

When we meditate, we're working on a skill: how to bring the mind into the present moment in a way that's alert and quiet at the same time. You come to the breath because that's your anchor in the present moment, and you try to stay here. To stay here solidly, figure out how to keep the mind interested in the breath. This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee teaches that you work with the breath energies. Notice how you feel the breath in the chest, how you feel the breath in the abdomen, how you feel it in your shoulders, your arms, your legs—"breath," here, being the energy that allows the air to come in and out of the lungs, more than the air itself. This energy flow can be anywhere. As you get more acquainted with this breath energy, you begin to realize that there are lots of other breath energies in the body, and that they can be beneficial for both body and mind.

If you have any chronic illnesses, this can be your beachhead: getting familiar with the breath. For example, if you've got a chronic pain in your foot or your leg, think of the breath energy going down the back, out the leg, out through the foot, out to the toes, and out through the toes. Doing this improves the circulation there, and the general energy flow gets improved. Things can actually get better. Now, as you experiment, you'll find that in some cases, working with the breath doesn't have much of an impact on some problems of the body, but you'll be surprised how many it does have an impact on. That's one way you can get interested in the flow of the breath and in wanting to stay with the breath.

Then there's the realization that the present moment is where you're creating suffering for the mind and you don't have to. If you want to see that suffering—how you're creating it so that you can put an end to it—you've got to stay right here. So that gives you even more motivation to stay here.

And as with any skill, as we're working on this we find that sometimes there's too much effort, sometimes there's not enough. Sometimes things are discovered by indirection. In other words, you see something out of the corner of your eye that you didn't expect. But you do that by having a regular regimen to follow. When you stick with that regimen, you begin to see minor variations and little subtle things you otherwise would have missed.

It's like a bus driver who drives the same route day after day after day.

As he gets used to the basic features of the route, he begins to notice slight changes here and there, in the road, on the sidewalk, in the buildings he drives past. If he didn't drive there everyday, he wouldn't notice the slight changes.

This is why we keep coming back to our basic meditation topic. As we keep coming back, coming back, we gradually see more clearly what we're doing as we come back. We also see more clearly what we're doing when we wander off or are getting ready to wander off. That allows us to head things off at the pass. In some cases, problems can be solved by approaching things systematically. In others, they can be solved only if you've tried everything you could think of, and then, if nothing works, you just stop and watch for a bit. Allow things to run on their own for a while.

But you're not giving up; you're just being strategic. Obviously, there's something that you're missing. Perhaps the way you're framing the issue to yourself is wrong. So you want to put that frame down and watch for a bit. Be open to different possibilities. When you catch something new, okay, try that out. Pick that up as your approach.

But always, as with any skill, it's not only the indirection and the balance that work. Sometimes you've just got to put in the effort. You put in time, you observe, and you apply lessons you've learned from the Dhamma you've heard.

There's a tendency in the forest tradition to take some of the Buddha's basic teachings on everyday Dhamma, and see how they can be applied to the practice of meditation. One very basic teaching lists the recommendations the Buddha gave on how to work for your own benefit in this lifetime. It's pretty basic stuff.

One, be industrious and take initiative in your work.

Two, when you've done your proper work and have gotten some income from it, you're vigilant in looking after what you've gained. You don't throw things away; you're not careless about them.

Three, you hang around with the right people—people who won't lead you astray.

And four, you conduct your life in a way that's appropriate for your income. In other words, you're not too stingy and you're not too extravagant. You're not too miserly, and yet you don't waste what you've got. You try to find just the right balance between working, denying yourself the pleasures you may want, and then supplying yourself with some of those pleasures as they're appropriate.

These are basic good instructions for how to lead your life so as to reap

happiness in the present lifetime: Take initiative in your work; look after your gains and take good care of what you've got; be careful of who you hang out with; and live your life in a balanced way.

These same principles apply to meditation.

To begin with, you've got to take initiative. You're sitting here and your mind is not settling down. You have to ask yourself, "What's wrong?" And try things out. Where are you focused in the body? Is your focus the right place to be focused right now? There are lots of places where you could be focused in the body—the tip of the nose, the middle of the forehead, in your palate, in the middle of the head, in your throat, your chest, your abdomen. If you find that focusing up in the head puts a lot of pressure up there, well, move your focus down. If you're focused down in the body and you find that you're getting drowsy, move your focus back up.

Then look at the breath. How are you breathing? Is this the best way you could be breathing right now? Sometimes the body seems to have a way of knowing how to breathe and sometimes it's totally clueless. In other words, the body—left to its own devices—can sometimes get into some really weird breath rhythms. So sometimes you listen to the body and what it seems to want to do, and other times you have to push things in another direction.

Back in the days when I had migraines, occasionally I'd get into a cycle where the way I was breathing was aggravating the migraine, and the migraine was aggravating the breath. To get out of that cycle, I had to very consciously breathe in a way that was not at all pleasant—I had to fill up the abdomen as much as possible, expand the abdomen in all directions as much as possible, breathing long for quite a while. And even though it wasn't pleasant, it would get me out of the unhealthy breath cycle and help alleviate the migraine.

So sometimes you have to push things in another direction, against what the body seems to be wanting to do. Again, you learn this by trial and error—which means that you have to take the initiative in trying to figure things out and experimenting with different approaches. Read the instructions in the book, give them a try, and if they don't work, you ask yourself, "Okay, where do I make adjustments?"

The next step is that, once you've got something good, you don't throw it away. When you're sitting here and the mind finally settles down, you do your best to maintain that sense of ease, that sense of stability. There's a part of the mind that may say, "Well, I've had enough now and I can move on to something else." That kind of enough is not enough. You want to stay here. You want to learn how to make staying here a skill. You're not here to just

give yourself a little hit of pleasure; you're here because you want to see the present moment continuously—because this is where things are going to come up. The stress and suffering that weigh down the mind come from your present actions. So you want to catch those actions in the act, and you want to keep your gaze steady so that when unexpected things appear, you're here to see them. That's being vigilant in the course of your meditation.

When you leave meditation, try not to fully leave. In other words, when you get up from here, you don't have to spill your concentration all over the floor. You carry it with you in the same way you'd carry a bowl full of oil or water—try not to let it drip. Maintain a sense of balance and poise as you get up and walk around. That'll keep you connected with the breath. And as you're connected with the breath, sometimes interesting things will come up as you're getting up, leaving the meditation, walking away. So again, don't throw away the possibility of seeing something unexpected during those unexpected times. It's so easy to have the attitude, "Well, the time to meditate is over and I'll meditate a bit more before I go to bed tonight," but in the meantime you've dropped things. So try not to drop things. Look after them; maintain them.

As for admirable friends, this of course refers to the different voices in your mind. The voices that are on the side of greed, aversion, and delusion don't advertise themselves as greed, aversion, and delusion's henchmen, but they are. You have to learn how to recognize them. Ajaan Suwat used to say that our problem is that we see pain as our enemy and craving as our friend. It's actually the other way around. If you learn how to get intimate with pain, you're going to be able to understand it and benefit from it, so in that way it's your friend. As for your cravings, you have to learn how to put a question mark against what they say. So be very careful about who you hang out with inside.

And finally with the principle of a balanced livelihood: We're meditating here both for clarity and for ease. There are times when the mind really needs just to plug in with a really comfortable breath and stay there without having to think much of anything else, because it needs the rest, it needs to regain its energies. But there will come a point when you can pull out of your concentration a little bit—don't pull all the way out—pull out a little bit and ask yourself, "What's going on in the mind? What am I latching onto? What am I doing right now that's causing some unnecessary stress?" In other words, ask yourself questions about the process of what the mind is doing right now.

When you learn how to balance these two things—the drive for pleasure and the questioning—that’s how the meditation can maintain itself. Your concentration leads to discernment and your discernment leads to more concentration. They work together.

Just be careful, though, when you’re going for the pleasure, that you don’t abandon the breath. This is something that’s all too easy, especially when there are people out there telling you that that’s what you’ve got to do. I was talking to someone this morning who was saying that he had been listening to teachers saying that if you want to get into deeper jhana, you abandon the breath and go jumping into the pleasure. Well, the pleasure is made steady by being steadily with the breath—either the in-and-out breath, or the background breath energies in the body. If you abandon the cause, everything begins to blur out. If you want to get solidly into concentration, stay with the breath and just allow it to grow more subtle. Even when the in-and-out breath grows still, there’s still a breath energy in the body—like a buzz in your nerves. That can be enough to keep you grounded—if you’ve developed a full-body awareness—so that you don’t go drifting away.

So even as you realize, “Okay, this is a time when I really need to just settle in and be quiet,” you’ve still got to be vigilant, you’ve got to look after what you’ve got, protect it. At the same time, when you’re asking questions of the mind, don’t go too far away from your concentration. If the analysis starts heading away from the present moment, you’re just going off into perceptions. Remember that the questions should always be related to what you’re doing right here, right now.

This is true for all meditation methods. When you’re analyzing the body parts, the questions are, “What are the perceptions I’m forming right now, what are they doing to the mind?”—the perceptions that you’re using in your analysis. You want to learn how to see which kinds of perceptions are there for the sake of saying, “I want this to be beautiful,” and the ones that say, “I want this to be unappealing.” What’s the choice aiming at? Who is making the choice? You want to look back into the mind.

It’s the same with the breath. You want to learn to look at what the Buddha calls the process of fabrication going on in the mind. That’s where the insight comes. It’s right here as you’re doing the concentration. So maintain this balance between going for the pleasure and going for the insight. They can’t be two radically separated things; they have to come together if they’re really going to give good results.

So this is one of the ways you can take a very basic teaching—the Buddha basically telling people how to find some success in the present life, get

some wealth, and benefit from it—and apply it to the wealth of your concentration, the wealth of your meditation. Have initiative. Be vigilant in protecting the good things you've got. Be very careful about who you hang out with. And try to find the right balance between your desire for pleasure and your desire for knowledge. This way your concentration will develop in a way that will benefit you right here, right now, in this present life. And it will have a good impact on into the future as well.

In Alignment

December 24, 2014

Ajaan Lee used to say that when you sit up straight in meditation—not leaning to the left or the right, forward or backward—you want to make that a symbol for your mind. The mind is sitting up straight, too. It's not leaning forward toward the future, back toward the past, left to things you like, right to things you don't like. So try to get your mind in alignment here with your body. Your body's sitting right here; you want your mind to sit right here, too. Don't go running off. And try keep everything balanced. Keep the breath balanced. Experiment a bit to see what feels just right.

Just like a balance trying to find its point of an even keel, it'll lean a little bit to the left, a little bit to the right, but just enough so that you eventually know what's straight up and down. Then try to keep it there.

This is our point of normalcy: the mind at ease in the present moment, just being aware. For most of us, that's not normalcy. Our normalcy is something else, thinking about all kinds of things all the time. But that's the normalcy of someone who's bent over or whose body is out of alignment, so try to bring things back into alignment. After all, this is the middle path and this is the middle: right concentration with its requisites of all the factors of the path.

This evening I was looking at a little video clip on Buddhism in Thailand, and the narrator was a guy from England who at the very end of the show says, "Obviously, Buddhism in Thailand is facing a crisis point; on the one hand, there is rampant materialism, and on the other hand, there's moral purity." He had been to a forest monastery and that was moral purity. He said, "Of course, as good Buddhists, we should all find the spot in between."

What does that mean, though?—"the spot in between." There is the phrase, "Just the right amount of wrong," but that's the advertising slogan for a casino hotel. And as Ajaan Maha Boowa says, the defilements have their sense of what's just right, too: right in the middle of the pillow, right in the middle of all kinds of activities that actually are pulling you off, out of alignment.

What you want is the Buddha's middle, and it may be a little bit hard to get used to if we've broken precepts in the past, or if our life is involved in a lot in greed, aversion, and delusion. It's like any process where, say, you try

to get your body into alignment. You go for a treatment, and the first couple of times it's hard to keep things in alignment after the treatment; you find yourself going back to your old ways of walking, sitting, etc. But if you keep at it long enough, you begin to realize that this new middle here, the new alignment, is actually a lot better, and you're more inclined to try to maintain it.

So even though it may feel unusual at first, you begin to gain a sense that this is the point of just right. As for what happened in the past, what you did in the past: Remember the Buddha's statement that someone who used to be heedless and then becomes heedful illumines the world in the same way that the moon at night, when it's released from the clouds, illumines the world below. In other words, don't let the clouds get in the way of your new brightness. They may come back a little bit, but you realize, okay, this is where you'd much rather be, and over time it does become your point of normalcy.

So think of yourself sitting here with the body perfectly balanced, your mind perfectly balanced; everything is in alignment, and try to get used to this new alignment. If there are any fears that you won't be able to keep it up, remember that it's natural for there to be some slips, but the more time you spend at it, the easier it becomes to recover from the slips. And again, as Ajaan Maha Boowa has said, "The practice is not a chopping block waiting to execute those who give their lives to it." It actually gives you a deeper sense of well-being, a higher sense of well-being, a more secure sense of well-being. Regardless of what you thought were normal ways of practicing, normal ways of living, you come to see this state as true normalcy. This is balance.

Or again, with Ajaan Lee: He said, "Look at the Buddha image in front of you. He's not disturbed by anything. People bring flowers, he's not disturbed; if people created a mess here in the hall, he wouldn't be disturbed." Try to have that same sense as you're sitting here, both with regard to things outside and to things happening inside the mind. You want to find the point of awareness that's aware and that's it: knowing these things as they come, as they go, not getting thrown off balance. It's when you're not thrown off balance that you have a much better sense of what's up and down, what's right and left, what's something that should be done, what's something that shouldn't be done. These things become a lot clearer when the mind itself is clear and at normalcy.

There was a famous Southern writer who was asked by a Northerner why Southern writers like to write about freaks so much, and she said,

“Because we recognize one when we see one.” In the same way, you want to have the ability to notice the freaks in your own mind and to recognize them for what they are. But to do that you’ve got to side with the point of balance and normalcy. So keep working on making this your default position, the position to which the mind always returns. That’s how you’re able to set things straight inside.

In the Present

December 22, 2014

The verse we chanted just now, *An Auspicious Day*, is one of the few places in the Canon where the Buddha talks about being in the present moment: “Don’t go longing after the past, don’t go placing your expectations on the future,” he says, but when he talks about the present, it’s not just being in the present or accepting the present as it is, without any judgment. He says, one, you clearly see what’s happening, particularly in the mind. That’s where you want to focus. And then two, you do your duty with regard to what’s coming up in the mind.

So there’s something you actually do. And when the Buddha talks about being in the present, it’s always in the context of heedfulness: If you don’t do your duties now, you don’t know how much longer you’ll have the opportunity to do them. But if you can do your duties now, you can find happiness “surviving on the present”: i.e., on the good things you’ve developed right here.

The duties here, of course, come from the four noble truths. If you see that there’s any suffering in the mind, you want to comprehend it. If you comprehend it to the point where you can see what’s causing it, then you want to abandon the cause so that ultimately you can realize cessation; and you do all of this by developing the path: all the good qualities that need to be developed, which includes abandoning the things that need to be abandoned.

So there are choices to make here. You’re not just hanging out in the present moment to enjoy it or accept it. You’re realizing that the present moment has consequences. It leads to the future, and you have those duties to keep in mind. That gives you a reference back to the past, so it’s not just pure present awareness. There are states of concentration where things get narrowed down to a very precise time in the present moment, but you’ve got to maintain the concentration. It doesn’t maintain itself—so even there, there’s a duty. Other times, when the mind is not in concentration, you’ve got to figure out, “What do I need to do? What are my duties right now?”

Here at the monastery, things are pretty simple. You don’t have too many conflicting duties. We’re all here for training the mind. There’s work we have to do, but the work periods are not overwhelming. We don’t have to

multi-task too much. All we have to do is focus on what we're doing right now, what we should be doing right now.

This ties in with another passage where the Buddha says to remind yourself, "Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I becoming right now?" You become, of course, through your actions, so what are you becoming by the way you act, what kind of person are you turning into by the habits you're following, and is that the direction you want to go?

This, too, points to the fact that the present moment is not an isolated moment. It builds on the past and it flows into the future. You focus on the present because you have a choice: You can continue flowing in the way you're going, or if you don't think it's wise, you can change the direction of the flow.

The Buddha gives a sense of urgency to being in the present by reminding you: Do your duty now, because who knows: Tomorrow may not come. Tomorrow may be death for you.

In other words, you're in the present moment because you're heedful, not because you want to enjoy how nice the present moment is or to squeeze what little bit of pleasure you can out of it. You're here because your choices have consequences and you've got this opportunity right now to make good choices that have good consequences.

So what should you be doing right now? At the moment, you're focusing on the breath. If the mind slips off, you bring it right back. That involves the three qualities that the Buddha said need to be brought to the establishing of mindfulness.

There is a popular belief that mindfulness simply means being in the present moment, but the Buddha never said that. Mindfulness is a quality of memory. You remember certain things—in this case, you remember your duties, and they're good duties. The duties assigned by the four noble truths are there for the sake of your own true happiness. They're not arbitrarily imposed by somebody out there who just wants to push you around.

They're taught by the Buddha because he saw that these are the most valuable things that human beings need to know, the most valuable duties they need to follow. So you keep your duties in mind and then you bring in the second quality: alertness. You're alert to what you're doing and what the consequences are right now. After all, sometimes the consequences don't wait until tomorrow or next week or your next life. They appear right now. If you spit into the wind, it comes right back at you. If you put your hand into a fire, you can burn it right now. So you're alert to look at what you're doing and to see what consequences you can detect right now.

Sometimes nothing seems to be happening, and that's when you have to fall back on your memory to encourage you to stay, and to remember that this practice takes time. The mind has been jumping around all day. You sit down, and it's going to want to continue jumping because that's its habit. This is where you have to bring in the third quality: ardency. If the mind jumps away, you just drop whatever it was following and you find yourself back with the breath.

And you try to stay here—with sensitivity. The effort to be sensitive is also a function of ardency.

This is where the pleasure in the present moment comes in as you try to stay with whatever pleasant sensations in the body you create through the way you breathe, through the way you perceive your breath. Think of the breath coming in and out through all the pores. It can flow anywhere in the body, so wherever there's a sense of tightness or blockage, hold in mind the perception that allows your mind to believe, okay, the breath can go through the blockage, no matter how solid your bones or the pains or any other solid-seeming parts may seem. There's a lot of space inside the atoms of the bones, so you can think of the breath flowing through that space, to create a sense of ease, fullness, refreshment throughout the body.

The present moment is not a wonderful moment on its own. It's a good place to stay because you've learned how to make it that way with mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. You remember what to do with the breath, you've learned to remember to be alert to what you're doing with the breath, and you've learned how to be ardent in doing it well.

At other times, when you're not meditating, there may be other chores you have to do. There are times when you do have to think about and plan for the future, times when you have to remember specific things that happened in the past, so you're not totally abandoning the past and future as you practice. But when you're sitting here doing concentration, you want your attention to be more and more totally right here—but still with that sense of mindfulness, of holding the right things in mind. If you lose your mindfulness, the concentration drifts into what Ajaan Lee calls “delusion concentration,” where you lose sense of where you're focused, where you are in time and space. When you come out, you wonder: “What was that? Was I awake? Was I asleep?” You're quiet and still, but there's no mindfulness, very little alertness, and no real ardency at all.

Now, ardency doesn't mean that you have to sweat and strain. In fact, if you do a lot of sweating and straining, it's not going to be pleasant to be here. Ardency means that you're on top of things: what you're doing right

now, what you should be doing right now. Are you doing what you should be doing? If not, what can you do to get the mind to want to do it?

So the establishing of mindfulness is very intimately related to the duties of the four noble truths. That quality of ardency is what carries out those duties; mindfulness keeps those duties in mind.

Ajaan Mun, toward the end of his life, when he was talking about his teaching style, commented that there were some things that he didn't reveal to everybody. He was very quiet about his psychic powers. We can now read about them in books and magazines everywhere, but when he was alive, he very rarely talked about them. He would mention them to students who were having similar experiences in their meditation, and the lesson was meant for them to apply the next time they met up with that kind of problem.

But the teachings he said that he taught with an open hand to everybody were two: one, the four noble truths, and two, the four establishings of mindfulness. Those go together. The four noble truths have their duties, and establishing mindfulness means using your powers of mindfulness to remember those duties and to carry them through as you stay here with the breath, as you maintain this awareness of the present moment.

There's no conflict between the two teachings. They're intimately related. We always have to keep that point in mind. Mindfulness isn't a state where you're not doing any duties. We're not here just to hang out in the present and enjoy the present moment and think that that's all there is. The breath here is part of the path described in the four noble truths. Your concentration centered in the breath and mindful of the breath is part of that path. It's going to take you someplace if you keep at it.

So try to keep these points in mind: that we're here to figure out what's our duty right now. Think: "What duty needs to be done? I'll do it today, I'll do it right now, because who knows, I may not have this chance tomorrow, or even a few moments from now." If we die, it takes a long time to get back to the practice. Think how long it took you in this lifetime to find your way to sitting right here, learning how to train the mind. If you're not careful, the next time around may be a lot longer than that. So you've got this opportunity right now. Focus on the "right now" because it's a place where the practice is done and where you can make a difference.

That is what it means to be with the present: to see it clearly and—once you see clearly what's going on—to realize what your duties are right now. Then you do them. That's when being in the present moment is really auspicious.

Remember This

January 16, 2014

One of the really useful qualities we're developing as we stay with the breath is mindfulness. If you're going to stay with the breath, you have to keep the breath in mind. As soon as you forget the breath, you're off someplace else. This training in remembering plays a huge part in the practice—and it bears repeating again and again and again that mindfulness is remembering. It's your active memory. It's how you apply your memory to what you're doing right now, what you're experiencing right now—because there's a lot to remember about how to shape your experience skillfully, and in particular, how to shape it into the path.

Usually when a thought comes up, it's your thought. If an opinion comes up, it's your opinion. A feeling, an emotion, a mood: The first thing you think is, "This is my mood," "my feeling," or "my opinion." We don't get to look at these things carefully—in the Buddha's terms, as something separate, in and of themselves. We just ride with them, and we end up dealing with these thoughts and opinions in very unskillful ways, because of that framework of "my."

So we need a new framework, a different framework for looking at these things, and that's what we've got to remember.

The Buddha said to look at the body in and of itself; feelings in and of themselves—"feelings" here meaning feelings of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain; mind-states, which is where moods, emotions, and opinions all come in; and then mental qualities—specific mental qualities that are skillful or unskillful and go into making up mind-states. In each of these cases, the Buddha gives you a framework for looking at these things in and of themselves so that, for the time being, you can take away the "my" and "mine," and instead look at these things as events, as part of a causal chain. Where do these things come from? Where do they lead?

Take feelings, for instance. There are feelings of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain. As the Buddha points out, in the abstract, there's nothing really wrong either with pleasure or pain. But there are specific pleasures that are worth cultivating and specific pleasures that are not. It's the same with pains. A lot of pains are totally useless. The Buddha gives an example of all the pain that went into the huge sacrifices kings and queens

used to perform back in his time. They were painful in the doing and painful in the result. That kind of pain doesn't accomplish anything.

Then there are pleasures. Some are worth developing, others are worth dropping. There's the pleasure of concentration. There's the pleasure of being generous. Those are skillful pleasures, pleasures worth developing.

For, as he also points out, we're not here just watching things arising and passing away on their own—because they don't arise and pass away on their own. There's an element of intention in how we shape our experience.

Simply focusing on the breath, you're changing the feelings in the body. If you learn how to apply your attention to the breath in the proper way, you can create what the Buddha calls "pleasure not-of-the-flesh." This doesn't happen on its own. There may be moments when it comes and goes, but you're not here just watching the moments. You're trying to develop the ease and pleasure that comes with being with the breath, to make it continuous. And that's a good pleasure, something worth cultivating.

As for unskillful pleasures: The Buddha says you want to stay away from them because of their impact on your mind—and through that, their impact on your actions and the way you affect other people.

So this is the framework you're trying to remember when a feeling comes. It's not so much, "It's my feeling," or "I like it," or "I don't like it." The question is, "Where does this feeling lead?" This brings your feelings and mind-states into the realm of right resolve.

As the Buddha said, the first thing that really got him on the path was his ability to separate his thoughts into two types: those worth pursuing and those worth letting go. What was the distinction? Basically, the distinction was: "Where do these thoughts lead? What kind of intention is motivating them? Where does the intention lead?" If the thoughts had to do with sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness, he would drop them—beat them down, actually, because they led to affliction, either for himself or for others. That's part of right resolve.

But if the thoughts were thoughts of renunciation, goodwill, or harmlessness, he'd allow them to roam around, because they caused no affliction. That's right resolve, too. He said it was like watching over cattle during the dry season, when there's no danger of their getting into the crops. All you have to do is just be mindful: "Okay, they're there. Remember that they're there." That was it. But he noticed that if you continued thinking in those ways, even if they were skillful, it would eventually tire the mind—and when the mind is tired, it's not only wearisome. It can weaken itself so that it can't keep its unskillful thoughts in check. That's why he brought the mind

to concentration.

The same principle applies to all the different thought patterns and mind-states that can go through the mind. You have to figure out which ones you can allow to roam around and which ones you've got to bring under control—and specifically, which kind of thinking is useful to get the mind into concentration. If your energy level is down and the mind is getting depressed, what can you do to lift your spirits? When the mind is wired and scattered all over the place with lots of frenetic energy, what can you do to calm it down? If the mind isn't concentrated, what can you do to get it concentrated? If the mind isn't in an expansive state, what can you do to expand it?

These are the questions the Buddha has you ask. This is the framework you want to keep in mind. This is your frame of reference; this is where you want to establish your mindfulness.

It's the same with mental qualities. The hindrances? You want to recognize: "These are hindrances." Sensual desire comes up and, all too often, we don't think, "This is a hindrance." We think, "Let's run with it." Thoughts of ill will come up. We can think of all the harm that other people have done us, and we can stew in that for quite a while, thinking that we're perfectly justified in wanting to see those people suffer. The mind gets sleepy? You tell yourself, "Ah, a sign that I'm getting drowsy. I'm getting tired. I need to rest." In other words, you side with the hindrances because they're yours. The Buddha wants you to take off that little label of "me" and say, "Okay, look at this simply in terms of this framework; keep this framework in mind." If any one of these five hindrances comes up, it's something you want to understand so that, through understanding it, you can drop it.

This is where another main aspect of mindfulness practice comes in, which is ardency. What can you do to develop the skillful states, and what can you do to get rid of the unskillful ones? You want to keep that in mind as well. Whatever lessons you've learned in the past, try them all out. And if nothing seems to work? Then try to use your ingenuity to figure out what's wrong. Keep watching until you can see the connection between a particular mind-state and what's giving rise to it—and then, how you can cut it off at the source.

As for the factors for awakening—mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity—how do you give rise to them? How do you recognize them when they're there? Sometimes they come as just little seeds or little tiny sprouts. How do you recognize a

moment of concentration, a moment of mindfulness? How do you recognize the potential for rapture? You want to look for these things. Learn how to recognize them and nurture them when they're there. When you're having trouble settling down, where in the body is there a sense of calm or serenity? If you're all tied up in tension—say, in your head—which part of the body is not tense? Focus there.

It's like that old book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, which recommends, when you're drawing a face, instead of drawing the eyes, the nose, and the mouth, that you draw the spaces between the mouth and the nose, between the eyes and the nose, between the edge of the hair and the eyebrow, and so forth. In other words, focus on the spaces you tend to ignore. You'll find that you can draw much more accurate pictures because you don't let your preconceived notions of the shape of an eye or a nose get in the way. You don't have preconceived notions about the shape of a forehead or the shape of the space between eyebrows and eyes. Those are the areas where you tend not to focus. So by focusing on the areas where you tend not to look, you find there's a space, and you can draw the shape of that space with a fresh eye. You get a much better picture.

It's the same with areas where there are bands of tension in the body. You don't focus on them; you don't connect them up; you focus on areas between them, where things are going well. The "going well" here may not be all that impressive to begin with, but if you give it some space, give it some time, it'll develop. One of the advantages of the kind of mindfulness practice that encourages you to be accepting and equanimous and patient is just that: You develop powers of patience and equanimity, so that when you can't figure something out, you have the patience to watch. And when you've figured out something and you know it's going to take time, well, you have the patience and equanimity to stick with it.

But mindfulness practice doesn't stop with equanimity. Equanimity is simply one of the elements of the practice. Remember that mindfulness is the remembering and the framework you're trying to keep in mind so that you recognize, when something comes up in the mind, what you can do with it—for example, when it's skillful to be equanimous and when it's not. This way, mindfulness practice fits ultimately into the four noble truths. Each truth has a duty. When something comes up, is it part of the truth of stress? Okay, remember: What do you do with stress? You try to comprehend it. You try to see where the clinging is—which particular aggregate you're clinging to—and then you learn how to depersonalize these things so that you can get the upper hand.

Part of you may resist, thinking, “Well, this is me. These are my feelings. This is me, mine”—whatever. But what’s happened is these things have taken you over. You’re enslaving yourself to these things: the clingings and the things that you cling to so much. Through your taking possession of them, they take possession of you.

So what the Buddha’s giving you is a framework for freeing yourself. It requires effort and ardency, but it’s all to the good. It’s in this way that mindfulness guides right effort and leads to right concentration, and to all the other right elements of the path that take you to freedom.

So remember this: Mindfulness is about remembering, holding a certain framework in mind, and then using that as a guide to what needs to be done with whatever comes up.

And you’re not just waiting for things to come up willy-nilly. You realize that certain things, when they come up, you have to let go. You have to get rid of them. Other things, when they come up, you want to encourage—to keep them going so that they can grow. As the Buddha says, this is what it means to have mindfulness as your governing principle: not just watching things coming and going, but realizing that some things, when they come, should be allowed to go really fast. In other words, you get rid of them as quickly and effectively as you can. Other things, skillful things, that haven’t yet come should be encouraged to come because they’re helpful. If they don’t arise on their own, you remember to make them arise—and to try to keep them from passing away.

So remember this, because this is the framework that helps you find freedom from all the things you used to lay claim to. But then, when you learn that you can pull off that label of “me” or “my,” you’re not deprived. You’re freed.

The Governing Principle

May 5, 2014

In the passage where the Buddha describes the different functions of the qualities you want to bring to the path, he describes mindfulness as the governing principle. In another passage, he explains what that means. Essentially, when you see that there's a good quality that hasn't arisen within you yet, you're mindful to give rise to it. Once you've given rise to it, you try to maintain it. That's what mindfulness does, so keep that in mind.

This is the exact opposite of what you often hear: that mindfulness simply watches things arising and passing away without interfering. But here its duty is to remind you: You've got to give rise to skillful qualities in the mind. And once you've got something skillful, you want to maintain it, to try to make sure that it doesn't pass away.

So always keep this in mind as you're practicing, because the teachings that tell you otherwise are all over the place. When we were trying to find a good translation for "mindfulness of breathing" in French, a French Buddhologist objected to the rendering that corresponded to "keeping the breath in mind" on the grounds that "To say that you could keep something in mind is to say that things could actually last, that you could actually conserve them and keep them going, whereas everything arises and passes away momentarily." That statement is a real misunderstanding of the teaching on inconstancy.

Your duty with regard to the four noble truths is to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation, and develop the path. To "develop" means that you give rise to it; and once it's there, you keep it going. That's the function of desire and right effort as well: the desire to abandon unskillful qualities, to develop qualities that are skillful, and once you've got them there, to keep them going and to keep developing them so that they get better and better. This may seem to be fighting against inconstancy, stress, and not-self—and that's precisely what it is. We're trying to create a state of mind that lasts, that's easeful, and that's under your control—to see how far you can go in that direction. This requires a special set of skills. You want to maintain the good things you've got, and that means recognizing them for what they are.

In the very beginning, concentration comes in little tiny pieces—

moments of stillness, moments of clarity, moments of ease. You want to learn how to recognize them, even as you're just working with each in-and-out breath. Where in the breath is it comfortable? Where is it not? Can you smooth out the uncomfortable parts while maintaining the comfortable ones and learning how to appreciate them?

That's one of the functions of the teaching on emptiness: When you realize that your mind has settled down to a certain extent, you realize that it's empty of a lot of the burdens and troubles it had before. The Buddha makes a comparison with leaving a village and going into the wilderness. You sit down in the wilderness and you realize all the hustle and bustle of life in the village is not there: The concerns about people, the concerns about your belongings, are not there. There's just the lesser disturbance that comes from being in the wilderness and perceiving it as wilderness.

Then you learn how to drop that perception because, after all, the perception of wilderness contains perceptions of dangers. So you drop the perception of wilderness and just think about earth. Everything that's there is just earth—the earth in your body, the earth in trees around you, the land around you. Even if there were an animal that would come and eat you, that would be earth, too—just earth eating earth. When you think in those terms, there's a lot less to get concerned about, because, after all, it's not eating you, it's eating the body. But you don't even think about those details; you just think about the earth-ness of everything. That's an even more refined state.

The Buddha recommends that before you try to move on from that, you first learn to appreciate it: Notice that there's a lessening of the burden of stress, there's a greater sense of openness, and indulge in that, delight in that, because this is what gives energy to your path.

So as you're focusing on the breath here, keep the same principle in mind. Whatever ease there is, appreciate that, cupping it in your hands, protecting it. It may just be one spot in the body to begin with, but think of it as like a small fire that you try to light in the midst of a windy plain. You've got to use your hands to cup whatever little flame you've got to protect it from the wind. There will come a point when the fire is strong enough that you don't have to cup it quite so closely. You can pull back a bit, but you still have to do what you can to protect it, because the wind is blowing. It's an open plain. So you put up a piece of metal or a piece of wood or something to shelter the flame. You keep looking after it. This principle of maintaining is very important because it's only when you maintain concentration that it can really develop into a strength. So you always try to keep this in mind:

Take that sense of well-being and do what you can to keep it going.

This is where Ajaan Lee recommends that, when you're evaluating the breath, you not only look at where it's comfortable and adjust it to make it comfortable; but then also, when it is comfortable, you try and get some use out of it, because that amplifies the sense of well-being, at the same time making it more solid. Think of your awareness filling the whole body. The breath energy fills the whole body. You might ask yourself—holding the perception in mind that there should be breath energy filling the body—to notice where it's strongest, where the breath energy feels most healthy. Then notice where it's weak. Can you think of good breath spreading from the healthier spots into the weaker ones? Is there any blockage? Do the energy channels feel like they've been squeezed out? Are they pinched at the end of a breath? Then think that you can open, open, open them up and protect that sense of energy. Once you realize that it's there, hold onto it. Again, "holding onto" it is not like grabbing hold of it, it's more like protecting it, cupping it in your hands. Protect it from the winds out there, because winds can come from all directions.

For example, dealing with other people, you suddenly run into their energies. Or you go to certain places where the place itself has strange or unfriendly energies. You don't want them to invade your space, so you try to protect yourself, because the breath, as it flows through the body, is like an electric current. It creates a magnetic field around the body that can act as a protection against negative energies coming in from outside. That way, even though you're dealing with difficult people, you don't have to inhale their difficulty, you don't have to absorb their difficulty, you don't have to let it come and occupy parts of your body. You were there first. You've got this protective shield.

It's when you sense this that you realize the value of maintaining. This gives the mind a good, safe place to stay. You become more and more sensitive to what's been invading your space all along and now you don't have to suffer from it. You've got something to help you battle against those negative energies, both within and without. So once things settle down and they feel good, try to maintain that.

Now, there are times when you hit something really good and you get so excited that you drop it. It's not so much that the desire to keep it going is a bad thing. After all, that's part of right effort. The trick lies in learning how to make that desire skillful, remembering that to keep it going requires certain causes that you're trying to learn; and that getting the mind in place and keeping it in place are two different things. The keeping requires a little

bit less energy. It's a more consistent, looking-after kind of energy, a hovering-around kind of energy. But it's something you've got to do continuously for it to really get the best results. So you focus the desire on looking for the causes and maintaining what causes you can.

Try to be gentle with the concentration. Learn to appreciate it. Learn to treat it with care, because when you look after it, it'll do a lot of good things for you as well. It's like that story of the lion and the mouse. The lion catches the mouse and the mouse pleads with him, "Let me go and maybe someday I'll be able to help you." The lion is so amused by the mouse's offer that he lets it go. And, of course, later on the lion is caught in the large hunter's net, and the mouse is able to come along and chew the net and free the lion. So this little bit of concentration, this little spot of being centered here in the body: If you look after it, maybe someday it'll be able to set you free.

The Easy Way Out

July 28, 2015

As the Buddha said, we're all born into this world with an arrow stuck into our hearts: the arrow of suffering, greed, aversion, delusion. We all want to find a way to take the arrow out.

Some of us, of course, don't realize that the arrow is there. We feel the pain but we think that it's coming from something else.

We grow up when we really realize that, okay, the arrow is here, and that we're the ones shooting ourselves.

There's another discourse where the Buddha says that whenever physical pain comes, it's like one arrow being stuck in us—and then we shoot ourselves with another arrow. Or actually it's more arrows than that: a whole quiver of arrows—being upset about the pain: “Why is this happening to me? Why is this suffering happening to me? Why can't I get rid of it right away?” And all those arrows just make the problem worse.

So, as he said, there is a path for the extraction of arrows—which is the noble eightfold path. This, he also says, is the only path. Sometimes you look at the path and it seems long and difficult. We'd like to see a shorter path, an easier path—we'd like to find the easy way out.

But this is the easy way out. If we can strip away all the complications that we add to the path, we find that it actually is an easy path: easy for the good side of the mind. It's asking you to do things that are honorable, things that are noble, things that feel really good deep down inside when you do them.

So ask yourself, “What obstacles are you putting in your own way?” And be patient but persistent in learning how to put them aside.

The difficulty, of course, is that a lot of these obstacles are things that we identify with.

I was reading a Dhamma talk by Ajaan Maha Boowa the other day and he was talking about how the problem with the defilements is we think they're us, and the idea of removing any of those defilements is like cutting off an arm, taking out your liver, taking out things that you think are vital to you. An important part of the skill of the meditation is learning to see them as something separate, that they really aren't you. You don't really need them.

So you want to develop a part of the mind that doesn't identify with them. Learn how to identify with the part that wants to be on the path and is not looking for shortcuts. Because all too often the shortcuts short-circuit everything, and the signs pointing to the shortcuts were put there by the defilements themselves.

You've got this breath, then you've got the next breath. We can't take a shortcut to the last breath of the hour without going through all the breaths in-between. If you try to find some other way, you're just creating more and more difficulties for yourself. And yet this is what the mind likes to do: It finds other things to think about, other places to go—anything but staying right here.

As a result, it doesn't get anywhere new. After all, this is a path that not only takes out the arrows in the heart but also helps you to realize things you haven't yet realized, to see and experience things you haven't yet seen or experienced, to attain something you've never attained before. It takes you to someplace that's really special.

So sometimes it requires learning some patience; other times it requires learning persistence. All the unglamorous but good qualities of the mind get to play their role—like the house-elves in Harry Potter. They're not very glamorous; they seem to be very minor. But it turns out that they're essential to the plot.

The same with patience, persistence: sticking with this breath and then this breath. And, oh, here comes another breath: Well, stick with that one, too. And then, here's another one. There may not be that much difference among them, but if you stay with them, you begin to see that there are differences.

And this is an important element in learning how to develop your own discernment. You can take other people's beautiful concepts—emptiness sounds wonderful, Oneness sounds wonderful, interconnectedness all sounds wonderful—but they're just words, ideas, perceptions. You've got to learn how to question perceptions as part of the practice—and you need to develop your own sensitivity if you're going to see things as they're actually happening.

That means looking at things that may not seem all that different to begin with, but then as you get used to them you can see, "Oh, this is different. This breath was different from that one. This mind-state is different from that one." You want to be able to see when there's more stress in the mind: Okay, what did you just do? Sometimes what you just did was a very subtle thing.

This is why the path is gradual. The Buddha's analogy is of the continental shelf off of India. It gradually, gradually, gradually slopes downward, and then finally there's a sudden drop-off. The sudden drop-off happens because the deathless is always there. What makes the process gradual, though, is the fact that your ability to discern these things can develop only gradually with patience, with practice, as your sensitivities develop.

We tend to think of wisdom as concepts but it's actually a matter of sensitivity, noticing when something has happened, noticing when something has been different, seeing minor distinctions. What's the difference between a desire that's part of the path and a desire that's a cause of suffering? You can probably describe it in words if you've been reading the texts, but actually to see it acting in the mind: That's a different matter entirely.

And so the purpose of this practice is to make you more sensitive. When the Buddha describes the steps of breath meditation in all the different tetrads, that's basically what it is: training in sensitivity. First you sensitize yourself to a particular aspect of your experience. Then you ask, "To what extent are you fabricating this element of your experience?" Then you try to notice, when you're fabricating that aspect—such as with the breath or with feelings or with your mind-states—which ways of fabricating are more stressful and which ones are less? Which ones add a burden to the mind and which ones take a burden off? Then you calm down the fabrication to move in a direction of less and less stress.

It's sensitivity training. You're becoming sensitive to the actions in your mind: things you've been living with all along but you don't really see clearly because you've been looking at them in another way or just looking past them, looking through them.

These events that come up in the mind: They're like signs, a finger pointing someplace. And for most of us, when we see the finger pointing, we look in the direction the finger's pointing. But as we meditate, we're learning to turn around and look directly at the finger: What is that finger? Who's pointing? Why? And is it good to follow the finger or not?

These are things you need to learn how to perceive for yourself. The instructions are there and they're all complete. You can't look for any hidden teachings that would make them easier. The Buddha laid everything out as clearly as possible and as simply as possible.

This is the easy way out. Just make sure that you don't add any unnecessary complications.

The Sport of Wise People

June 19, 2015

Ajaan Fuang once called concentration practice “the sport of wise people.” Like any sport, it’s something you want to do well but you also want to enjoy yourself while you’re doing it. So you’ve got to find that right balance between sticking with it, mastering the technique, and having some fun in the process. Otherwise it gets grim and serious. Of course, our purpose is serious, the practice is serious—we’re dealing with a big problem, the problem of suffering—but if you’re grim about the path, that grimness begins to grind you down. So you have to learn how to develop a light attitude around what you’re doing.

One of the skills of meditation is learning how to gladden the mind as you’re practicing. So, what would gladden your mind right now? Maybe some thoughts of goodwill. Try to think of someone you’ve never extended goodwill to before and spread goodwill to that person. You might want to choose someone a little bit challenging, and take it as you’d take a challenge in any sport: Here’s a problem, here’s a difficulty, but there must be a way around it, and you’re going to find it. This is one of the hallmarks of people who are not just good at a particular sport but really good. Once they’ve mastered one problem, they figure out where the next problem is, and the next, and they take joy in posing questions and learning how to answer them.

Once you’ve spread thoughts of goodwill, the next question is, how are you going to stay with the breath? Where would be a fun place to focus on the breath right now? Some place you haven’t thought of before, something new, something different. Ajaan Fuang would sometimes talk about thinking of a pole of light inside the body, extending down from the middle of the head, down through the spine. As you breathe in, think of the breath coming in from all directions into that pole of light, and as you breathe out think of it going out in all directions from that pole of light. This way, you’re not staying with just one spot. You’ve got a line in the body for your focus.

Another time I heard him talking about breathing into your bones—think of all the bones in the body and the breath energy going into the marrow.

What this means is that you’ve got to ventilate the mind a little bit.

Otherwise, it gets stagnant like the huts here when they're closed during the heat of the day. I've been going into the empty huts and opening them up in the evening and they're really stuffy because there's no circulation at all. Sometimes the temperature inside is actually cooler than the temperature outside, but because nothing is moving, because there's no ventilation, it feels hotter. And the mind can be that way, too. If you've got a particular idea about the meditation in mind and you just hold, hold, hold to it and don't have any opportunities for changing things a little bit, it gets stuffy. So think of things that will gladden the mind, things that will bring some novelty to your meditation, and that way you give yourself some staying power.

Also, think about things you're carrying in from the day or carrying in from other aspects of your life. Can you let go of them? A lot of things we hold onto as being really important in life: We define ourselves around them, but if we can't let them go at all, it's like having a muscle that's tensed up all the time. So think of something you tell yourself would be impossible to let go of and then see if you can put it down for right now. Think the opposite thought.

Like that character in *Through the Looking Glass* who said he liked to think about three or four impossible things every morning before breakfast: Think of something that would be ordinarily impossible for you to let go of, something you would define yourself around, and see if you can un-define yourself, at least for the time being. After all, everything you're holding in mind right now, you'll have to let go of at some point—all of your perceptions, all of your ideas. When the time comes to leave the body, you're going to have to leave a lot of those behind as well—and it's good to get practice in letting go, because the path requires staying power, and the trick to staying power lies in letting go of things that are really unnecessary.

It's like going camping. If you want to hike for a long time, you take a light burden: the lighter the burden, the longer you can hike. But most of us have too many things in our knapsack—we're afraid we're going to miss this little convenience or that, we've got to hold onto this, hold onto that—and as a result we hardly get away from the trailhead at all.

So with any distraction that comes up in the meditation, just say, "Let go, let go, let go." You hold onto the breath, or whatever you've taken as your object, and just say to yourself, "That's it, that's all I'm going to hold onto." And have a light attitude toward it. As Ajaan Fuang would say, you play with the meditation. But you don't play in a desultory or scatterbrained way. You play in the same way that a professional sportsperson would play at a sport—

you keep at it, keep at it, keep at it, but find ways of making it interesting, ways of making it challenging, and learn how to encourage yourself to be up for the challenge, to enjoy the challenges. This is what gives you staying power.

I've been working on a project having to do with humor in the Pali Canon. There are two basic ways it's used. One is to let go of the values of the world, to encourage you not to be impressed by things that people in the world are generally impressed by, such as the fact that there are devas out there. There are some people who think, "Wow, if I get to talk to a deva I must be really special. The deva might give me important information." Well, the Buddha has you question that, by pointing out in a humorous way that there are a lot of devas who don't really know very much.

Or you might think that people who are rich and wealthy and powerful have something that'd be worth aspiring to—well, you look at the lives of the kings in the time of the Buddha. For all their power, they had a lot of the problems that everybody else has: nothing special there. In fact, they have a lot of problems that ordinary people don't have. People who want a share of their power will feel no compunction about lying to them.

So use the discernment of humor to give yourself a sense of distance from the values of the world. You can step back and realize, "I'm not enmeshed in those things; I don't have to be enmeshed in those things; those are things that I don't have to believe in or be impressed by"—and there's a lightness that comes from that.

The other use of humor is to look at the practice as something enjoyable. There's a really nice image of a bull elephant who's tired of being in a herd of elephants: When he goes down to bathe, all the other elephants bump up against him. He tries to drink clear water, but all the elephants have muddied the water. So he goes off alone and bathes without anybody bumping into him. When he drinks water, it's clear. Whenever he itches anywhere, he takes a branch off a tree and scratches himself with it. And the Buddha interprets this image as being like a person who's going off to meditate: You use your concentration to scratch wherever you feel an itch.

So, where does your mind itch right now? Where does your body itch right now? Can you use the breath to scratch it? Can you use whatever your concentration topic is to scratch it? The image is nice and light-hearted, and so even though we're serious about the practice—and, as I say, we're dealing with a serious problem, the suffering in the mind—we want to have a light touch. Otherwise things get bogged down.

I think I've told you about the Englishman who walked across the

Northwest Territories way back in the 1820s—the first recorded instance of an English person entrusting his life to a band of Dene. As they were going across the land, of course, they were hunting. On some days they'd catch some game and on other days they wouldn't. On the days when they couldn't catch game, he said, they tightened up their belts and spent their time joking with one another as they walked along, to keep up their spirits. Otherwise, you start focusing on how hungry you are and you get more and more miserable and the trail seems more and more impossible. But if you can keep a light spirit about things, a long trail becomes shorter, and a heavy load becomes light.

So do what you can to keep your spirits up and to enjoy the meditation as a game.

Building a Home for the Mind

November 25, 2015

The texts often talk about concentration as being a home for the mind—*vihara-dhamma*—the place where the mind can settle in. Before you can settle in, though, you have to build a house. And as Ajaan Lee said, the work in building this house lies in the directed thought and evaluation. You find a topic that you like to think about and then you evaluate it here in the present moment.

For example with the breath, you've got all kinds of in-and-out breathing that you can focus on: long, short, heavy, light, deep, shallow, fast, slow. Or you can start with the breath energies in the body. Some people, in the beginning, find them easier to focus on than the in-and-out breath. Just scan through the body. Notice where there's any tension or tightness. Think of it relaxing. And then move on until you've been through the body several times. As you do that for a while, you'll find that the in-and-out breathing will find its own rhythm that's just right for the needs of the body.

The important point is that you're focused on the sensations in the present moment. That's what you're thinking about and that's what you're evaluating. It's not that you're thinking about something someplace else or analyzing things in abstract terms. You're asking very practical questions, focused on what you're doing. How does this feel? Is this a place where you can settle in? How's the living room? How's the dining room? Is it big enough? Or do you feel cramped or tight? You've got to expand the house.

Think not only of the body but also of the area immediately around the body. Can you sense an energy field there? Some people can; some people can't. If you can, how do you make use of it? That's a lot of what the evaluation is about. It's like looking at the lumber and the other things

you've got for the house. What can you make with this lumber? You may have had one house in mind, but when you actually get your materials, you see they're not quite what you expected. Well, make the best of what you've got.

You'll find that there are some parts of the body where the energy is hard to work with. Well, work around them. If there's a blockage someplace, think that the breath can go right through it. If there's a pain in one part of the body and the more you focus on it, the worse it seems to get, ask yourself, "What is my perception adding to the pain? Can I think about the pain using other perceptions?" So the evaluation here evaluates the breath and other physical aspects of the body together with what you're doing, in terms of your perceptions and thoughts, to see what can be changed.

One perception game that I've found useful is that, if you feel that there's a pain in your back, ask yourself, "Suppose that pain was actually a pain in the front of the body and I'm misperceiving it?" And hold the perception in mind that it's actually a pain in the front. Or if the pain is in the front, see if you can perceive it as being in the back. You'll find that the energies in the body move around. Sometimes even your posture will change a bit. The pain will change. And you've learned something about the power of perception. You've learned something about how you relate to the body; how your awareness relates to the body. And you begin to realize there's a lot to explore in the present moment.

Someone asked me the other day what I found interesting in the breath. And I said, "There's just so much to explore in the area of how your awareness relates to this physical body here. How is it that it can move the body? Why is it that your perceptions change the way you sense the body? How does this all work?" If you're interested in these questions—and how can you not be interested?—the breath is the ideal interface for watching the relationship between body and mind. When you can explore things in these terms, you've won half the battle right there, because then the house won't be just a nice place where you rest before you go looking for entertainment outside. You find there's a lot of entertainment in the house—educational entertainment—because it's not just a house of lumber and shingles. It's a home of your awareness in this body.

You've taken up residence in this body. You've been with it for a long time. So what's actually going on here with this relationship? There's plenty to study. There are the different elements or properties: earth, water, wind, fire. Breath, of course, is part of the wind element. On cold days like this, it's good to have something warm inside. Well, where are the warm parts of the

body, or the parts that are warmer than others? Think about those. Evaluate those. In other words, see how you can integrate them with the breath, and spread the warmth around the body.

When this kind of evaluation becomes too tiring for you, let yourself rest. You work at building the house, but you can't work 24/7, so rest in what you've got: a corner of a room that you're able to make comfortable, even though the rest of the house is unfinished. Convince yourself that it's good enough for you to stay here for a while.

Someone was telling us about a meditation teacher who'd get into different levels of concentration but wouldn't stay there very long because, although they were pleasant at first, they wouldn't stay pleasant for more than a few minutes. That's not right concentration. Right concentration has to be a place where you can settle down and stay, in comfort, for long periods of time. So evaluate things. Check to see: Is the amount of pressure you're putting on the breath something you could apply comfortably for a long period of time, or are you pushing too much? If it's too much, okay, back off a bit. Try to find out what's just right that can stay just right, something you can stick with for long periods of time. It's not that you're going to push, push, push and then break through to something. You simply stay and learn how to be balanced right here. When things are in balance, they open up. They don't open up when you push them too hard.

The more precise your awareness of what's going on, the more precise your sensitivity to what's going on, then the more solid and balanced the breath becomes—and the more solid and balanced your concentration.

So we're evaluating the breath and evaluating the way the mind relates to the breath. When a sense of pleasure does come, you evaluate what to do with it. How do you spread it without ruining it? If you push on it to spread it around, that's not going to be pleasant anymore. Pleasure has to radiate, to glow. Sometimes it'll flow. But you can't push it. All you can do is open up the different channels of energy, or the spots where things are tight and blocked, and see what happens. This is how you can develop a place where you can settle in and stay.

And when the work is done, you can put aside the directed thought and evaluation and rest comfortably in deeper levels of concentration because the whole body has been worked through and cleaned out. It's as if directed thought and evaluation are sweeping through the body, getting rid of all the cobwebs, getting rid of all the dust, throwing out the junk that clutters your way. When those things are gone, you can settle in and become one with the breath: unification of awareness, as the Buddha calls it. There's a sense of

flow and there's no sense that you have to direct it or that the flow is going to stop. It just flows and flows and you're right there. The Buddha's image is of a lake that's fed by a spring welling up. One of the Thai ajaans called it still flowing water—the mind is still, but there's a sense of flow in the body. And you allow that to mature. You settle in.

The next step in making your home more comfortable is to use a little bit of directed thought and evaluation to take you to deeper and deeper levels of concentration. You settle into one level, and then you back up a bit to see where there's still some disturbance on that level. It's like a dog getting ready to lie down to sleep. It lies down and then feels a root or a stone that's getting in the way. So it gets up, circles around and finds it, scratches it away, and then lies down with an even greater sense of ease.

You don't have to count the levels of concentration you go through. Just start asking yourself these questions: Where's the disturbance in here? What's causing it? Can I drop the cause? This is what the work is all about: settling in and then realizing, okay, it's not quite right. Back up a little bit, check things out, evaluate a little bit. You can sense what's wrong. Okay, fix that. And then settle in again. And if you don't see anything wrong, stay right there. Let the mind gain a sense of ease, gain a sense of well-being from settling in.

As the Buddha said, you want to indulge in the sense of well-being because it's nourishing for the mind. Ajaan Fuang called it the lubricant of our practice. It keeps things flowing, keeps things running smoothly, without a lot of friction. You get a greater and greater sense that you really belong here. This is a good place to be. You feel no need to move.

Some people are afraid that when they get into concentration, they'll get stuck there and won't be able to get out. Actually, you can get out very easily. Concentration is one of the easiest things in the world to leave. The stuckness that they're afraid of is the fear—and it's a legitimate fear for people with addictive tendencies—that they'll crave this so much that they'll get overly upset about anything that disturbs it, that they'll always keep running away to concentration, without dealing with the issues of the world or their own inner issues. That can be a problem. But first develop the concentration, because those problems can be solved.

The problem that can't be solved is if you're afraid to do the concentration and don't do it, or if you're afraid to settle in, or if you're afraid to stay. Right concentration has to involve finding a place where you can stay for long periods of time, because there are a lot of issues in the mind that you won't be able to understand unless you watch them steadily,

continuously for long stretches of time.

As we deal with the troublemakers in the mind—the defilements and other unskillful qualities—you have to be alert to their tricks. And only a very steady gaze can see through some of those tricks. So this is what you need. Find an object that you can stay with. And if it's not quite right, evaluate it and adjust it so that it becomes right—something you can stay with for long periods of time without a lot of in and out, in and out. It's like riding in a car. If the driver's foot isn't steady on the accelerator, it goes up and down, up and down, and the ride is jerky. You want a smooth ride so that you can read in the car. You want to be able to settle in so that you can stay steadily here and read your own mind.

And as for whatever level of jhana it might be, you can put those questions aside. Right concentration is not focused on jhana. It's focused on an object like the breath. The quality of the concentration, the jhana itself, comes from being really settled and doing your proper concentration work with the breath and your perceptions so that you can settle in with the breath even more. You want a quality of awareness that allows you to be steady and to watch steadily things that are very subtle, to see how they're connected. This connection may take a while to detect, to understand. So, try to get into a state that can stay steadily here.

If you can do the work you need to do, it'll go further than concentration and lead you to something that's even more solid—an even greater refuge than your little home of concentration. Think of concentration as a little shack that you build on the side of the path. It's not your ultimate home, but you build it well because you're going to be on the path for a while. And the act of building and furnishing the home will teach you lessons about the mind. Your sensitivities will improve. Your standards as to what counts as pleasure will get heightened. While the home allows you to rest, the act of building the home will spark the insights that can take you where you ultimately want to go.

The Thread of Mindfulness

April 13, 2015

The Buddha speaks of concentration as a perception-attainment through all the levels from the first jhana up through the dimension of nothingness. In each case, the perception you hold in mind keeps you in concentration, which means that as we're concentrating, we're fighting against the passage we chanted just now about perceptions being inconstant. Concentration itself, of course, is inconstant, but that doesn't mean you just give it up and throw it away. It's a fabrication, but it's a path-fabrication, just like all the other factors of the path. It's something you've got to foster, something you've got to develop. You're mindful to give rise to it and you're mindful to keep it going.

When the Buddha talks about mindfulness as a governing principle in the practice, that's what he's referring to. You remember to keep good things going. You don't just watch things coming and going and leave them at that. You realize that there are some things you want to give rise to, other things you want to keep going, and others you want to prevent.

So in this case, as we're settling down, you want to keep the perception of the breath going. You can test different perceptions of the breath to see which ones are most conducive to settling down right now: the breath as flowing through the whole body; the breath as little lines going through the body, coming in and out of the pores—whatever perception allows you to settle in with the breath with a sense of ease. And you notice that the perception you apply to the body will have an impact on how you experience the body. It's not just a matter of trying to get the most accurate picture in your mind of what the breath is already really doing. You want to keep a picture in mind that's going to be helpful in getting the mind to settle down and then learn to stick with it.

As you go through the various levels of concentration, the object gets a lot more refined. Sometimes you want to rush to the more refined levels when you're not quite ready. Say you're working with the really obvious breath sensations in the body. They support your perception. The perception may come in little blips and then you have to remember to extend it a little bit more and then extend it a little bit more. And in those gaps between the perceptions, the fact that you've got an obvious breath

sensation right here helps with the continuity. In other words, the perception keeps you with the breath and the breath keeps you with the perception. And in your attempt to keep the perception going, if your mindfulness isn't strong enough, then as soon as the breath begins to disappear, that little mutual help society begins to break down. The sensation of the breath is not there to remind you to keep the perception going, and you can drop it very easily.

So if you find yourself moving into an area where the breath is that refined and you can't follow it, step back and allow the breath to be a little more blatant, a little more obvious, and work on this skill of just keeping the perception going, stitching one perception to another to another to another until that thread—stitching things together—gets a lot stronger. Then you'll be able to stay with more refined objects all the way to the point where the breath stops. The in-and-out breath stops, and what you've got left is a very still field of breath energy throughout the body. If your mindfulness is strong enough, you'll be able to stay right there, very still.

As it gets even stronger, you begin to notice that the perception of the body's having a shape begins to come and go. And you can let that perception go. What you've got left is a cloud of little sensation-droplets, and you begin to perceive space between all these droplets. If you can't stay with that perception, you go back to the sensation of having a body. But if you find that you don't need a very strong physical sensation to keep you with that perception of space, you'll be able to stay there.

This is why you have to build up to these things by strengthening your mindfulness, your ability to remember to stay right here, because the perception is what keeps you going, and the mindfulness is what keeps the perception going as the sensations that help to support that perception get less and less obvious. The same applies to the perception of infinite consciousness and the perception of nothingness. Then, when all you have keeping you going is the perception of nothingness, the mind can reach an equilibrium where it doesn't need a perception in order to stay concentrated. You get to the state called neither perception nor non-perception, where you recognize where you are, but you don't have a name for it. That requires a lot of equilibrium.

So try to take stock of where you are on this ladder of concentration. If you find yourself reaching up to a higher level and grasping at air, and there doesn't seem to be anything there, go back to where you are. Or if you can hold onto the next rung a little bit but then find that it's getting a little slippery, go back to where you feel more solid.

The burden of the concentration lies right in this act of being mindful. That's why it's so important to realize that when the Buddha was teaching mindfulness and concentration, they were meant to go together. Sometimes you hear that mindfulness is a broad, open, easeful acceptance of whatever comes up, whereas concentration is narrower, more focused, effortful—in other words, two things you can't do at the same time. I was even reading a book on mindfulness saying that basically there are two paths: the path of mindfulness on the one hand and the path of effort and concentration on the other, and they don't mix. But that's based on a misunderstanding of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. And you need it for concentration because that's what stitches the various perceptions together that hold your mind right here so that you don't go wandering off.

In the beginning, it's like having a lot of frayed threads or dangling ends. The thread may be there, but it's not stitched to anything, or you may have little perception moments, but there's nothing's stitching them together. But if you can be clear about the perception and clear about the sensations that support the perception, then even if there are a few lapses in the thread of mindfulness, the sensations support you and you're right here, right here, right here.

So try to be very meticulous in threading things together because that's what takes these little perceptions that are inconstant and turns them into something more constant. You're pushing against that characteristic of inconstancy, just like you're pushing against the characteristic of stress: Try to make things pleasant here. You're also pushing against the characteristic of not-self: You try to get some control over your ability to stitch these things together into a genuine path, something that can take you someplace. But it's not going to take you out of the body. It's all going to go deeper and deeper in here, deeper into the mind. And as your mindfulness gets stronger, then you can stay with more and more subtle things and not get distracted along the way.

I knew a monk once in Thailand who was reputed to have psychic powers, very strange psychic powers. He told Ajaan Fuang one time of a trip he had taken into a cave together with another monk. There was a treasure in the cave that they wanted, they'd asked permission of the devas guarding the cave, and the devas had given their permission. But as they were going through the cave, they found the skeletons of other people who had been in the cave and had tried to take things that hadn't been allowed. Sounds like an Indiana Jones kind of movie. So they got what they wanted and left.

In the same way, as you're meditating here, remember that there are other things that will tempt you away. If you're not careful, you might start stitching other things aside from the breath into your mind-state. But right now, that's not what you want. There may be temptations on either side, as in the cave, but you try to be straight-arrow and hold to your word, in the sense that you stick with these perceptions: just the breath, just the breath, just the breath. And that way you get through okay.

Imperturbable

June 18, 2014

Before the mind can settle down, you have to do a little housecleaning, to clean up the mind, clean up the body. Cleaning up the mind is putting it in the right mood with the right attitude so that it's ready to settle down and not pick up a lot of other issues. After all, you've got a whole hour here free to think about anything you want, and there will be a part of the mind, or many parts of the mind, that have other agendas.

That's why we do the chanting: to remind you that those agendas are not of any interest right now, not of any worth. Think about things of the past: They're gone. Things in the future—you don't really know what's going to happen, but you do know that the mind has to be well trained to deal well with whatever unexpected dangers may come. And it's not going to be well trained by thinking about sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas—which is what most of our thinking tends to be about. As it says in the discourse we chanted just now, to remind ourselves: These things burn away at the mind as long as there's greed, aversion, and delusion. Until you take care of the greed, aversion, and delusion, your thoughts of past and future tend to do nothing more than add more fuel to the fire.

Then you can remind yourself with the chants on the brahma-viharas, that you do really want true happiness, a happiness that's good for everybody.

So the chants are there to clean out a lot of unskillful attitudes in the mind and to get you ready to settle down as you bring your attention into the body. This is where you have to clean things out in the body a bit, because when you start focusing in on the body, the power of your focus tends to push the blood around, interrupting the flow of energy and getting very restrictive. It can be very uncomfortable. So the natural reaction is to run away, to leave the focus. You find yourself bouncing around the body quite a lot, or in the body and outside it.

So once you've got the right attitude that being here is important, clean things out a little bit in the body by making sure that the energy's flowing well in different parts of the body. You can make a survey. Start down at the navel and move up the front of the body, over the top of the head, down the back, down the shoulders and the arms, down through the legs, out to the

tips of the toes. Try to loosen up all the areas of tightness so that you can see how getting your awareness centered is one thing, and the flow of energy in the body is something else. They may occupy the same space but they don't have to affect each other. In particular, the movement of the mind in the center shouldn't squeeze things out.

It's as if your awareness and the body are on different wavelengths that don't have to interfere with each other, like the different radio signals going through the air. First make sure you're clearly aware of the movement of the energy in the body and that it's moving well. Then, as your awareness begins to settle down in whatever spot you've chosen, make sure that it doesn't offer any resistance to allowing that energy to move. When you can make this distinction, then it's a lot easier to settle down and just be here really solidly with a sense of genuine well-being.

And then what do you do when you're here? You remind yourself that this is a place you want to stay so that you can develop a skill: the skill of staying very, very still. Even though it may not seem like anything is happening, things are happening. There are little stirrings here and stirrings there that, if you paid attention to them, would pull you away. And you're developing the skill of not getting pulled away.

There's a passage in the Vinaya where Ven. Moggallana's talking to some monks and saying that when he was in what they call the imperturbable concentration, sitting by the bank of a river, he heard the elephants in the river playing and trumpeting, splashing around and crossing over the river. The monks got upset. They didn't think that if he was in that concentration he'd be able to recognize those things, so they went to complain to the Buddha. And the Buddha said, "Actually, there is that concentration. It wasn't quite pure, but that does count as the imperturbable concentration."

Now, imperturbable concentration is pretty advanced—at least the fourth jhana, and some of the formless states. The texts say that in pure levels of the formless states, you don't experience the five senses, whereas they don't place that condition on the four jhanas. And as Moggallana's story suggests, even with the formless states, it's still possible to hear sounds if your attainment isn't fully pure. And as in Moggallana's case, even though his attainment wasn't pure, it was good enough to get him to arahantship.

So we're not trying to block out our ears here. It's simply a matter of not getting pulled away by any of the disturbances that would come up—whether they're outside or inside; physical or mental. Just think of them exploding into nothingness, whereas your mind is solidly right here. That's the quality you want, this quality of solidity. And we're trying to make the

mind solid, which is different from making the body solid. Some people will find that as the mind settles down, it does actually stiffen up the body, which is an effect of focusing too strongly on the earth element. This is one of the reasons why we go through the body first and straighten out the breath energy so that it doesn't get unbalanced that way.

It's possible, when the mind settles in, that you find that you can't breathe. If it feels oppressive, that's a sign that you're using your awareness to squeeze the body. You don't want that. You want the awareness to settle in the same place as the body, but not to squeeze anything in the body. Let the breath come and go freely. If it wants to settle down and stop, let it stop, but don't force it to. You apply force to the mind, not to the breath. Learn how to make that distinction. It's an important one. You want the body to be light, open, but you want your mind to be solidly centered right here. Everything is focusing in here. The more you can maintain this focus and keep it solid, the greater the strength of your concentration.

This comes from being able to clean things out as you remind yourself that nothing out there deserves your attention right now. You don't have any responsibilities to know anything about the world right now. You want to develop this skill of getting the mind really centered, gathering in, gathering in right here in a way that allows the body to feel at ease and the mind to feel unperturbed. If you allow it to get perturbed by things coming in through the senses, the Buddha said, it's like a cow with flayed skin being attacked by flies. It's constantly a matter of this little bite here, that little bite there, all the time, coming in from all directions: sight, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. They're all coming in all the time, all the time. And if you let them disturb you, it's like those caribou you see up in Alaska. The mosquitoes are getting them. They buck and they run all over the place, with their bodies contorted in pain. That's the mind that leaves itself open to outside stimuli. We're not trying to block them out in the sense of not being able to hear them or sense their presence. But we are blocking them out in the sense that we just don't want to pay them any attention.

So if you find the mind going out to things outside, keep reminding yourself that there's nothing out there that will really nourish you. The nourishment lies in here. The problem actually lies in here: the voice that wants to go out; the impulse to go out. But if you don't look very carefully and steadily right here, you never see where the impulse comes from. You just sense its push, its movement, and you go along with it. But here we're trying to be imperturbable. Don't let yourself get fazed by anything. It's in this way that the mind develops strength.

Scramble the Image

December 9, 2014

A common habit when you focus on the body is to tense up at the spot where you're focused—which may help maintain the focus for a while but it's going to cause problems in the long term. It blocks the flow of the blood, makes you uncomfortable, makes it hard to stay.

So you've got to think about your focus in a new way. Instead of thinking that you're outside the area, boxing it in, you're inside the spot that you're focused on. And you're radiating relaxation out in every direction. Try to hold that perception in mind wherever you're focused. As for any little patterns of tension that may come up, just see if you can breathe through them. Think of the breath as a solvent that dissolves them away.

Then keep watch. See what kind of breathing helps with this kind of focus. Breathing too heavily can be unpleasant; breathing too lightly can make it hard to stay focused, especially in the beginning. You find that as your ability to stay focused with a sense of relaxation gets more skillful, and that you're more used to it, then you can stay there as the breath gets more and more subtle, more and more subtle, until it seems like it's not coming in or going out at all. That's perfectly fine. You're not going to die. The body will breathe if it needs to. The fact that the mind is doing a lot less work means you're using a lot less oxygen, so the need to breathe is reduced.

And if you ask where you're going, you're not going anywhere. You're going to stay right here. You want to be in charge right here, established right here. Then just try to notice if anything comes up that's going to dislodge you, that's going to pull you away. Once you feel really established here, then you're going to notice any movement of the mind that goes out in any direction. If you're not yet well established, you'll probably go with it. But as you get more and more used to being here—centered in this feeling of relaxation, this feeling of openness—there'll come a point when you realize that you don't have to go with the mind as it runs out. You can see it run out for a little ways and then it stops because you're not running with it.

If you run with it, you can take it all around the world several times. But if you don't run with it, it goes out just a little tiny way and then it stops. It's like a flashlight beam that can go only so far. But if you're carrying the flashlight and you want to see the end of the beam, you go running after it.

That, of course, just keeps the beam going further and further and further away. But if you stay right here, it goes only so far and then it stops.

And you begin to notice that as thoughts form, they form right at the spot where the mind and the body seem to meet. In fact, it's hard to say whether the original stirring is a mental stirring or a physical stirring. It's an as-yet-uncommitted stirring right there in your awareness: a little knot, a little swiggle. If you slap a label of "physical" or "mental" on it, it'll go in that direction. Before that happens, though, see if you can comb it out. It's like a knot in your hair: You comb it out with the breath and with your powers of perception. You may begin to notice that there's a word associated with that little knot or a little picture. And you can attack it either from the side of the breath or you can attack it from the side of being a picture or a word. Either way, scramble it.

You've probably seen images on a TV where things are going fine, it looks like a person talking on the TV screen, and all of a sudden everything gets scrambled into dots of color. Well, try that with every image that comes up in the mind, once you're well established and there's a sense of well-being inside, so that you can step back from the movements of the mind and just watch them as processes. Instead of thinking about how you're going to gain some pleasure out of this thought or that perception, simply step back and see, "Oh, these are just processes in the mind. They come and they go. They form and then they disband." See what happens if you speed up the disbanding a little bit by scrambling the image. Anywhere you tend to notice an image forming, scramble it before it even turns into anything that you could recognize. And see what happens.

Try not to lose your foundation here with the breath, or with the sense of the body. You'll begin to notice that you have a greater sense of control over things going on in the mind. A thought forms and you don't have to be subjected to whatever it's going to be or going to do to you.

You also find, though, that there are some thoughts that you tend to like to follow, old video clips that could be either things that actually happened, or things that you would have liked to have happened, that you want to happen in the future, or just things that you find entertaining right now: things that the mind goes toward either because of lust or greed or anger or whatever. When you try to scramble those images, part of the mind will resist. It wants to protect them, saying, "Don't touch these things. You can throw a lot of things out of the attic, but these things have to stay." And if you listen to that voice, you never get down to, "Well, why are you so protective of that?" Go ahead and scramble the image. This is one way of

digging up unknown attachments—or some old known attachments that you finally decide you’re going to take on. And see what the mind has to say. Whatever comes up—good, bad, indifferent, whatever—scramble it.

Some of the forest ajaans say that if you have an image of the body, think of having a knife that you can use to cut through all the tendons, all the connecting tissues. You could start out by going through the image piece by piece like that, as with the reflection on the parts of the body. But then say, “Okay, what are these parts of the body made of?” And you chop them up and atomize everything. See how the mind responds.

You want to do this when you’re in a relatively calm space, so you don’t immediately side with the hungers that go after the various images that you’ve used to entertain yourself. Some of them seem very deeply lodged, but if you make your stillness of mind deeper than that, then you can begin to understand, “The mind tends to entertain itself with these images, tends to play with them, but what does it get out of them? Nothing. Just these little images that it stitches together, reflections on the water that it tries to stitch into a story.”

Ajaan Lee says it’s like watching a movie. And there are two ways you can watch the movie. Either you can follow the story, and it looks like there really are people or events up there on the screen that you can recognize and you can make sense out of—and that can get you stirred up. Or you can decide, “I don’t need to make sense out of this. I just want to watch this as an exercise in flashes of color: red, yellow, orange, white, green, blue.”

And if the thought was indifferent, well, fine, you just make sure that that hasn’t kidnapped your concentration. If it’s not so indifferent, if there’s more of an emotional pull to that particular image, then it’s even more important that you learn how to scramble it. After all, that’s how you dig out the mind’s ideas about why it needs to protect those things. You can expose them to the light of your awareness, the light of your alertness.

This is one of the ways in which discernment, strengthened by concentration, digs down into things and finds the root causes. Once you can see that there’s really nothing there in terms of the root cause—in other words, nothing you’d really want to follow when you come right down to it—that’s when you can begin to free yourself from the stress and suffering that can come from your fascination with these things.

Dethinking Thinking

September 15, 2015

Dogen had a nice definition for meditation, which is “dethinking your thinking.” You’re trying to take apart the concepts that you carry around with you, especially the ones that are causing you to suffer—and a lot of these concepts you believe in, very firmly. They’re what the Thai ajaans called *sommut*, from the Pali *sammatti*. They’re the conventions by which we communicate with one another, make sense of our world around us, especially in the social sphere, through the agreements we have, both within ourselves and with other people. The word “red” has a certain meaning. The word “blue” has another meaning. “Like,” “dislike”: All the concepts of language are things that we learn to agree on with one another, to use when we deal with one another.

We also carry a lot of those concepts inside. We have lots of beliefs about ourselves, about how we run things inside our mind—sometimes skillful; sometimes not, particularly if you come from an unhealthy environment, which a lot of America is now. Many of the concepts you bring inside for dealing with your own thoughts, figuring out what’s going on inside, are actually harmful.

So you want to learn how to dethink those thoughts. It’s not a matter of just putting them aside. It’s a matter of taking them apart, questioning them. At first, to do the proper questioning, you have to get the mind in a good place. That’s why we practice concentration, so that you can dethink your thoughts not out of desperation or from neurotic dislike for them, but from a place of balanced well-being. You put the mind in a good place and then, from there, you can gaze back at the ideas you’ve been carrying around and you can ask yourself with some objectivity: “Are those really helpful right now?”

Even something as simple as the notion of facing forward: Close your eyes. The body has a sense of forward and back, but why does the mind have to carry that in? We tend to think of the mind as being like the eyes that face forward. But what happens if you think of the mind just as being a radiance going out in all directions, and all directions are equal?

Then, of course, there are concepts about the breath. I don’t know how many people have said, “There’s no way breath can go through your nerves.

How does air go through nerves?” Well, “breath” here isn’t air. It’s energy, and there are many layers of energy in the body. Our society doesn’t encourage us to look at these layers of energy or provide us with any coherent way of thinking about them. So here is one way you can rethink your thinking. Think of your sense of the body here as just breath. Everything you know about the sense of your hands, your feet, your legs, your torso, your head: Just tell yourself that your first perception of these things is energy. Then, from that, the perception goes into the sense of being solid or warm or cold. So it’s not like you’re trying to push the breath through the solid parts. You’re just allowing the breath to come first. Give it priority. And let those other things fall into the background, because, after all, the breath is what allows you to sense these things to begin with.

This becomes a useful way of dealing with pain. Pain tends to get glommed together with the earth element, your sense of solidity in the body. Of course, that makes the pain seem solid. So to get past that, you learn how to question the solidity of the pain. You experience the breath before you experience the pain: Think of it in that way. We have a subconscious tendency, when there’s a pain, to allow the breath energy to flow up to the pain and then stop. Well, that makes it worse. We tighten up around the pain in our childish desire to put a boundary around it, to keep it from spreading, and then the energy can’t go through. We feel that the pain is there first and the breath comes second. So reverse that. The breath is first. The pain is second.

And the breath is something other than pain. It’s a physical element, but pain is something else. It’s that sharpness, that heightened sense of displeasure or discomfort. But once you untangle it from the solidity of the body, you begin to realize it’s a lot more fluid and insubstantial than you thought before.

Ajaan Chah has a nice analogy. He says it’s like you’re sitting in the one seat in the house, and all the other things that come have no place to sit down. They’re there at your pleasure. They come and they go, but you’re the one in the seat. You’re in charge. Thinking of the breath this way puts you more in charge of what’s going on in your sensation of the body. You were here first. The breath is here first. The pain is secondary. It’s not the case that the pain has moved in and laid claim to it and pushed us out, unless we allow ourselves to be pushed out and give the seat up to it. We were there first. The breath is there first.

Once you can start taking apart your thoughts and perceptions about the body, you can do that with thoughts and perceptions about other things as

well. A thought comes up and you can recognize it as a voice from someone in your family, someone in school, or somebody in the media. Or it's one of your old defilements: in other words, your identity in the past that wants to come back. That's why the *ajans* personify the defilements, because you gave them personality by assuming them as your identity. Learn to question that. When these things come in and say things, ask yourself, "What if the opposite is true? And why do I have to believe those concepts anyhow?"

When I was in Thailand at Wat Asokaram, we'd have Dhamma talks every night. They had a rotating roster of monks. And out of the fourteen monks on the roster, maybe two could give good Dhamma talks, and the rest were boring: not very insightful, not very helpful. So I made a game of it: Even though I could hear the talk, I was going to very definitely not understand it. It was just going to be sounds, sounds, sounds. A word would come and I wouldn't connect it with the word before it, and I wouldn't connect that one with the word that came after. When you do that, you find that the mind can quiet down a lot faster.

Well, you can try the same trick with your own thoughts. Just think of them as gibberish. Cut the connections between them. Think of them as a foreign language. You don't have to take on their concepts—because often when you take on their concepts, you take on their grammar, too, which creates a kind of reality. Again, this is what they call *sommut* in Thai: conventions, supposings, agreed-on meanings.

It's interesting that the Thai word for "convention" also means a "supposing." You suppose things into being. You make those agreements for useful purposes, but you don't have to agree with them all the time. You can say, "For the time being, I'm just going to be here with the breath and I don't have to agree with any other thought that comes in, any other language that comes in." As soon as a thought appears, think of it dissolving away. Think of it exploding. Pains arise in the body. Think of them being dispersed, dispersed. You're not clamping down on them—because all too often that's what we do. A pain comes in and our instinctive reaction is, "How can I make sure this doesn't spread?" And so we tense up around it, thinking that that's a way of keeping it from spreading. Of course, that actually creates extra pain.

So instead of thinking of the pain as a thing, think of it as just these moments that come and go; come and go. They're whizzing past and they're going away from you. Instead of thinking that they're coming at you from the front, think of them as coming at you from behind. You've got the right to think of them in those terms: As soon as you realize that they're there,

they're going away from you. That loosens up a lot of the tightness and tension, a lot of the sense of being burdened by these things, being attacked by these things, of being on the receiving end. You don't have to receive them. They're not guests. You're not obliged to be polite with them. You're sitting here with your eyes closed and you've got the one seat in the house. You don't have to have anything to do with anything else. See how many of your conventions and supposings and internal agreements you can put aside, at least for the time being. You can dethink them. Flip them around. Turn them inside out. Just think of them as being gibberish right now.

The only thing that's real is your sense of awareness, very clearly here with the sensation of the breath—the sensation of energy here for the body. Eventually, you'll want to dethink that, too, but not yet. Use that first to dethink other things. That way, the things that have long had a hold on the mind don't have a hold anymore because you're not holding onto them. This is like the Buddha's image of fire. Fire feeds on its fuel and clings to the fuel and, as a result, is stuck on its fuel. It's interesting that a lot of ancient cultures perceived fire as clinging. The I Ching talks about fire as clinging as well. And of course it clings. Take a stick with a flaming end and try to shake the fire off the stick, and you'll see that the fire holds onto the stick no matter how much you swing it around. It clings—and as a result, it's trapped. And then, as they say in Pali, it gets freed when it goes out. It's freed because it lets go.

How are you going to be free of your thoughts unless you learn how to let them go? You won't gain any freedom until you give them their freedom to go. You keep digging them up and hanging onto them, digging them up, hanging onto them. They present themselves and you immediately turn things into the type of reality that fits into your conventional, supposed, agreed-on notions of reality, and that places lots of limitations on you.

So learn how to question those agreements. Say, "I'll use those agreements when they're necessary, use those supposings, those suppositions, when they're necessary, but right now they're not." Why carry them around? They'll come back when you need them. A lot of those things you don't need right now. All you have to do is be aware of the breath. It's all around you. It's bathing you. It's not the case that you're on one side of the breath facing forward looking at the breath. It's all around you. So try to have an all-around awareness of this all-around element and see how that changes the dynamic inside.

Training Your Cynical Voices

March 18, 2014

Training the mind is work. Greed, aversion, and delusion have gotten very well ensconced in the mind, and it's going to take a lot of digging to get them out.

The reason we're sitting here meditating is because at least some of the voices in the mind say, "Yes, you can do this," or, "Yes, you can find some peace of mind this way." But when they start getting to work, other voices in the mind get stirred: the cynics, the skeptics, the ones who don't want to do the work, who want an easy way out of the work, either by doubting the teaching or by doubting your ability to practice the teachings.

And yet the cynical voices do have their uses. You have to learn how to apply the cynics to your greed or your aversion or your delusion or any other unskillful attitude that comes up in the mind. Those are things you really have to question. So a lot of the training lies in learning when to use the cynics and when not.

Laziness is a big problem that you have to be cynical about. The voices that say, "You can't do this," are largely motivated by a desire to be let off the hook. They say, "Well, I'm incapable of doing this." The old story about the game leg: "I've got this game leg that makes it impossible for me to do this or that job," regardless of whether the leg is game or not, or of whether the job requires a good leg. You've got to learn how to be cynical about that, skeptical about that. When the mind says, "You can't do this," how much effort have you actually put into this? How much are you really trying to do the practice?

As Ajaan Lee once said, there are only four jhanas. There are people who can run corporations with thousands of workers and develop land stretching for thousands of acres. Yet here, all we have are just four jhanas and we can't figure out where they are or what to do with them or how to find them.

It's work, but it's good work, and often pleasant work. And even when it's not all that pleasant, the fact that it's heading you in the right direction, and you're doing noble, honorable things, makes it good work.

So this is when you have to bring out your motivating factors, the "I believe in you" forces. Remind yourself of why this is a good thing and how you're not being asked to do anything superhuman.

There is a tendency to think of the Buddha and some of the great arahants as being superhuman, but they were human beings. At some point in their career they had all the problems you have—and probably more. But they were able to turn themselves around—sometimes with help, sometimes without anybody there to help them at all.

The most someone else can do for you is to provide you with advice, provide you with a good example, and create a good atmosphere. From there, the work is yours.

Ajaan Fuang noticed that his students, when he was not in Bangkok, had a lot of trouble meditating on their own. But when he was there, their minds could settle down. He realized he had to create an atmosphere for them, and that's what he was doing as he sat there and meditated with them.

In the same way, we've tried to create the right atmosphere here at the monastery. This is a quiet place. People live virtuous lives here, and that creates a good environment for the practice. There are the teachings, and there are good examples all around you. So, as much as other people can do for you, they're doing it. Now it's up to you to do the remaining work yourself.

And what are you asked to do? Look at the noble eightfold path. Try to develop right view. Try to develop right resolve: the resolve not to stay stuck in your sensual fascinations, not to stay stuck in harming yourself or harming others, or having ill will for yourself or ill will for others. There's nothing really superhuman there.

In some cases it takes a lot of effort. Sensuality is one of the hardest problems for the mind to overcome. But there are people who can do it. And even if you don't get all the way there, the fact that you've learned to curb your sensuality, or your fascination with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, as opposed to the qualities of rapture and well-being that can come just from inhabiting the body: It's all to the good.

Right speech, right action: You're asked to avoid things that are harmful. Again, it's not superhuman. Right livelihood: Earn your livelihood in a way that's honest.

The real work comes in those last three factors of the path: right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. But these are all things that you can do. What are you asked to keep in mind? Your body, your feelings, mind-states, mental qualities: things that are right here. You keep them in mind so that you can sort out what's happening in the mind, what's happening in the body, and you can figure out what to do with it.

This is what the right effort is, or the ardency in right mindfulness.

When unskillful mind-states come up, you learn how to drop them, drop them, drop them. If they keep coming back, you drop them some more. What usually happens is you get tired before they do. But they can wear out, too, you know. You've got to have some confidence in yourself, that you are a human being, and you're being asked simply to commit yourself to doing something that human beings can do.

As for skillful mind-states, they're good things to develop. The mind gets clearer, sharper.

This is a path where you're asked to do nothing but good things. Try to be aware of your body. Again, you're not being asked to be aware of something that's far out there in the abstract. It's something right here, right now. And it feels good to inhabit the body; it feels good to be with the breath.

As for right concentration, if thinking about jhana is causing problems one way or another, put it aside. Nobody gets into jhana by thinking about jhana. You get into right concentration by focusing on your breath, focusing on the body. You don't have to think about directed thought and evaluation. You just do them. Evaluate your breath. If it's not good, change it. Keep coming back to the breath again and again and again. Keep exploring how you can breathe in a way that really feels gratifying. As for the stages of concentration, they'll come on their own when you're working with the breath like this.

So there's nothing superhuman about what you're doing here—simply that you've got to learn how to train those committee members and turn the cynical or skeptical voices on your greed, aversion, and delusion. At the same time, learn how to bring in some more confidence, conviction in this path.

For most of us, it's not a path that we learned about when we were growing up as children. It's something new. And as a result, it often can feel foreign. But what's really amazing about this path is that it's common to human beings all over the world. All these qualities, starting from right view through right concentration, are things that you can develop regardless of your background.

Now you may have different problems coming to it. And we tend to think in the West that we have some special problems that we bring to this, and maybe in some cases we do. But a lot of times it's just the same old stuff rehashed again and again and again.

You read about the people who disliked the Dhamma back in the time of the Buddha, argued with it, resisted it. And a lot of their resistance was the

same sort of stuff you see now: They were materialists, they didn't believe in the power of kamma, thought that going to nibbana was impossible or selfish. But were they the people who benefitted from hearing the Buddha? No.

The Buddha taught noble truths. The word ariya, which we translate as "noble," also means standard or universal. They're true all over the world. The problem is simply a matter of learning how to relate to them in a way that's as natural to you as just breathing. Start with the breath. Start with your actions. Notice where you're doing things that are harmful, thinking in ways that are harmful, speaking in ways that are harmful. Figure out ways to stop causing that harm, and then your thoughts and your words and your deeds will begin to fall in line with the path. It's nothing foreign, nothing superhuman.

But it is work. So you have to be very careful about the voices that tend to get lazy. There's the critical voice that says, "You're not doing things well enough," and partly that's right. If you'd totally mastered these skills, you'd be an arahant. But the part that says, "You can't do this": That's the part you have to watch out for. It sounds so convincing but it doesn't have any proof. It can point to times in the past when you've not done very well in the meditation, but that's not proof that you can't do it now.

One of the attitudes the Buddha has you develop is seeing that other people can do this: "They're human beings, they can do it; I'm a human being, I can do it, too." That's the attitude you want to develop.

So learn how to sort out these voices in the mind and figure out which ones to apply to which problems. Be skeptical about your cynical voices, as you should be skeptical about your greed, aversion, and delusion. There's a fair amount of aversion in the skepticism and the cynicism. And there's a lot of delusion, thinking that you'd be better off not doing the practice, or resting, not driving yourself so hard.

What this comes down to is that you've really got to train your powers of judgment so that you judge things in a way that's helpful and not in a way that destroys the skill you're trying to develop.

So learn to look at these voices from all sides. They have their uses and they have their abuses. When you can see that they're not totally bad or totally good, and you can sort out when they're bad and when they're good, that's when you can start to depend on yourself on the path.

Boring

November 27, 2011

The voice that says, “This is boring”: Why do we believe it so easily?

Lots of other voices come into the mind and you can listen to them and not get involved. But the one that says, “This is boring,” seems to sneak right into you, and you identify with it immediately.

So it’s important that you learn not to do that and to be on your guard. Otherwise it takes over. You sit for a while watching the breath and a voice in the mind says, “This is boring, nothing’s happening,” and you can go off and think about things you’ve thought about who-knows-how-many times and yet not find it boring.

You can think about food. How many flavors are there in food? Not that many, really. Sexual fantasies: Whatever your favorite fantasies may be, there are not that many variations in those fantasies. And yet we can go over them again and again and again and not find them boring.

Then there’s aging, illness, and death. By now we should be really bored with them. Yet we keep coming back for more.

But then when you sit down with the breath—which is your path away from this boring suffering that we’ve been going through all along—you very quickly get bored with that.

There are basically two reasons for this. One is that you’re not paying careful enough attention. There was an ajaan in the forest tradition who once complained to Ajaan Lee, saying, “What is there to see? Where are you going to get any discernment out of watching the breath? It’s nothing but in, out, in, out, that’s all. What kind of discernment can you get from that?”

Ajaan Lee replied, “Well, if that’s all you see, then that’s all there is.”

In other words, the problem is not with the breath, it’s with the attitude you bring to it. After all, where did the Buddha find awakening? Right here at the breath. And his breath wasn’t any different from ours. What was different was the attitude of interest and attention that he brought to it—because, of course, he wasn’t watching just the breath. He was watching the mind in relationship to the breath, seeing a lot of subtle movements going on in the mind.

Those are the really interesting things. And everything you need to know

for awakening is right here. It's just that your powers of observation are not subtle and all-around enough. And if you can't even see the subtleties of the breath, there's no way you're going to see the subtleties of the mind.

So start questioning your attitude toward the breath. What's going on when you breathe in? What's going on when you breathe out? How does the in-and-out breath relate to the other breath energies in the body? There's a lot to explore here.

If you find that there are pains in different parts of the body, this is an excellent time to see how the breath relates to pain. What kind of breathing aggravates the pain? What kind of breathing helps to alleviate the pain? What ways of perceiving the breath either aggravate or alleviate the pain?

Or if you find that there's a sense of ease, you can play with that. Can you spread it around? Can you spread it out to every pore? Can you keep it going? How long can you keep it going?

If, when you've kept it going for a while, the mind says, "Well, okay, enough of that," you have to say, "Why? Why is that enough? If it were really enough you'd be awakened. But you haven't gained that yet. So try doing something new with the breath."

There's nothing you're going to learn by just doing the same things over and over and over again without trying any variations, without asking any questions. This is where insight comes from: from asking the right questions.

Just as with science: New revolutions in science come from asking new questions, the kinds of questions that people prior to that time would just dismiss.

For example, all the questions people started asking that led to chaos theory are things that people used to ignore: a dripping faucet, for example. Is there a pattern in the drips of a faucet? Most people just dismissed the question. Nobody ever learned anything from it. But then a group of physics students decided to ask, "Well, what if we made a graph?" They started observing the dripping faucet and they began to see interesting patterns. Those patterns led to some important discoveries in chaos theory.

So there are things going on all around you and inside you that you're not paying attention to. As a result, you don't learn from them. So when you find yourself feeling bored, ask yourself, "Is there some way I could pay closer attention? Is there something going on here that I'm not curious about or not learning how to question, taking too much for granted?"

Because that's a lot of what the problems in the meditation are: things that you just take for granted. They've "got to be that way." Well, do they

really have to?

If your normal pattern is that you're sitting here for an hour and it takes a good thirty minutes for the mind to gradually drift down, well, why? You know where you have to go. You know what you've got to do. Why does it require this long, gradual drift? Can't you get right to the point at the very beginning and see how long you can stay there?

Part of the problem is that you've made up a narrative about how the meditation has to go. And whether it's a good or bad narrative, you're comfortable with it. But it's a pretty boring narrative.

So once you've found your spot, remember that. The next time you sit down, go right there—don't waste any time—and see what happens around there. If you're afraid that you won't know what to do with all that extra time of stillness, ask yourself why you're afraid. When you probe into the matter, you'll learn some interesting things.

So that's the first thing you want to look for when you find yourself listening to that voice that says, "This is boring," and you're getting ready to believe it. It's usually a sign that you're not paying very careful attention.

Fabrications are going on. Perceptions are going on. All the aggregates are going on right here, and you're relating to them in your old ways. And as we all know, the old ways are the ones that cause you to suffer. There's ignorance there.

There's something you're not looking into, some question you're not asking. So try to cast around and see what that question might be—the question that will allow for some new ways of doing things as you stay here with the breath coming in, the breath going out.

If you need some added motivation to stay here, you can drop the breath for a little while and go to the other recollections: the recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. Recollection of death—the fact that it could happen at any time. Whatever recollection you find gets you more motivated: Think about it for a while until you're ready to come back to the breath.

And remind yourself: Everything you're going to need is right here, simply that you haven't noticed it yet.

As Ajaan Lee says, it's like walking back and forth on a path. A path that you follow often is one you start to get to know really intimately. If you pay attention, you'll notice subtle differences in the path that you would have missed if you had followed the path only once or twice. Otherwise, if you don't pay attention, if you just go on automatic pilot, you're never going to see anything, no matter how many times you walk the path.

But the advantage of staying with the breath is that there are also the movements of intention right here in the present moment and those are the things you've really got to watch out for. That's the kamma in the meditation.

All of the other factors that you need to understand: They're right here for you to observe again and again and again. If you let yourself get bored with them, you're never going to see their subtleties. You just tell yourself, "Okay, I've seen this before. I know this." Remind yourself, if you really knew these things, you'd be an arahant. You'd be free from suffering. So there's still something you don't know. That's one way of dealing with boredom.

The other type of boredom is the one that comes over you when something is about to appear in the mind and you don't want to look at it. You're about to uncover something important, but a part of the mind wants to keep it hidden, so it puts you to sleep.

This is why the Buddha has you fight drowsiness and not give in to it right away. Test it. Probe it. Challenge it. Change the way you breathe. Visualize a light right in front of you. Rub your limbs. If you have to, get up and walk around for a while, do some walking meditation. See if that wakes you up.

But don't give in to that old habit that says, "Well, if there's drowsiness I might as well go to sleep right now; I must really need it," or "If I'm drowsy, this meditation is not going to go well, I'd better stop." Sometimes something's about to come up but the mind is hiding it from itself. So hold that thought in mind, "I don't want to be afraid of whatever comes up, whatever the unattractive defilement might be. If I don't let myself see it, I'm never going to be able to get past it."

The problem is that part of you is identifying with that defilement. All too often, we identify with all the wrong parts of the mind. This is why you identify with the boredom that's hiding something that's causing you to suffer. So you've got to remember: The things that you hold onto are causing you to suffer. However much you may like them, however much mileage you may get out of making them part of your internal narrative, you've got to remind yourself: If you ever want to get past the problem of suffering, you've got to be able to look at whatever comes up in the mind.

So if there's a sense of drowsiness that comes with the boredom, take it as a warning sign: Something is being avoided in the mind.

So those are the two primary things to look for when that voice comes up, "This is boring." You have to ask, "Really? Well, let's stick with

something that's boring for a while." We've spent most of our lives running away from what's boring, complaining about what's boring. So turn around and face it. Look at it carefully. Is it really boring? If it's part of the path, there's something interesting going on here that you're missing.

What's really boring is the way that we keep giving in to our old defilements again and again and again, and suffering again and again and again. You've got to ask yourself, "At what point will you have had enough?" Nobody else can ask that question for you. So you've got to ask it of yourself.

Your Intentions Come First

June 12, 2015

The passages we chant before we begin to meditate are for the purpose of firming up your intention to sit here and meditate, to be with the breath for the whole hour. To begin with, we think about principles of kamma: that the body is not going to stay with us—it's going to get old, grow sick, die; we'll leave our friends; all we've got is our kamma. And that comes from the mind. So the mind needs to be trained, to make sure that its kamma is good.

Then we have the reflections on goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, to remind us that we want a happiness that's true, something that really lasts and doesn't harm anyone. The equanimity also reminds us that there is only so much we can do in the world, and that if we want true happiness, we need to go beyond kamma.

So these are some of the reflections that help us to get our motivations straight and get our intentions strong—because our intentions make a huge difference in how we're going to experience the next hour.

You've got the body here; you've got the breath. And a lot of what you experience in the body and breath comes from old kamma. As the Buddha said, all of our six senses should be experienced as old kamma. But we're not just stuck with old kamma; in fact, our present kamma is something we experience prior to sensory contact. This is a peculiar point in the Buddha's description of causality: that intentions come prior to our experience of the six senses. In one sense it's not peculiar. We can often see for ourselves how the way we have an intention in the mind is going to shape the way we experience things. If we're hungry right now, we're going to experience the world in one way. If we've had more than enough food, we're going to experience the world in another way. It all comes down to our intentions.

What's strange about this is that your present intention, your present kamma, is actually something that you experience prior to the results of your past kamma. The contact at the six senses, which the Buddha identifies with old kamma, comes further down the line. Yet all too often we go running to the contact and build on that, getting upset when the contact is unpleasant, forgetting that we have an opportunity here to shape things well from the very beginning.

So take advantage of the fact that your intentions come first. As the

Buddha said, the mind is in the forefront of all things. The very first verses in the Dhammapada say, “The mind is the forerunner of all dhammas; it’s in charge.” So don’t abdicate the fact that you’re in charge. Take advantage of it. Make up your mind that you’re going to stay here and keep that in mind. That’s what mindfulness is for. It’s to remind you that how you experience the next hour will depend on your intentions. So keep your intention really, really solid. You want to stay with the breath, and you want to do it well. That means you want to stay here continually.

Now, it’s not simply through willpower that that’s going to happen. You need some help. Help comes in learning how to play with the breath, having a strategy for staying here. That’s part of your intention as well. You can breathe in any kind of way, so how about breathing in a way that feels really, really good?—a way that feels nourishing for the body, soothing for the mind, energizing when you’re feeling tired, grounding when you’re feeling scattered. There’s lots to explore right here. So make that your intention. You want to explore what the breath can do for you here in the present moment.

And try not to get waylaid. Something may come up—a pain or a particularly interesting thought. You have to keep reminding yourself: You’re here for the skill of dealing with the breath. You’re not here for those other things. You’ve had thoughts before; you’ve had pains before. You don’t have to get all excited about them. Even if it’s an amazing and original thought: If it’s really that good, it’ll be there when you come out of meditation. For the time being, though, you want to stick with your original intention no matter what.

It’s like those scenes in the movies where a person is given permission to go into a hall of treasures and then take one treasure out. The catch is that there are lots of other treasures in the hall as well, and the people who get distracted by the other treasures end up not getting anything at all. So keep your mind on the one treasure: You want to learn how to get the mind under your control; you want to learn to get the mind to be still and solid and clear, here in the present moment, with an awareness that’s centered but broad—not broad in the sense of running after things in all directions, but broad in the sense of having a wide range of awareness throughout the body.

Make the body one sensation, i.e., the sensation of breath. Make that the one topic of your mind. As you experience the hands and feet, try to experience them as an aspect of breath. Every part of the body: Experience it as an aspect of breath. There will be still breath energy in some parts of the body, and moving breath energy in other parts. Ajaan Lee has a long list

of the different kinds of energies: the ones that go back and forth; the ones that spin around in place. Also different levels of breath energy: energy moving through the blood vessels; energy moving through the nerves; still breath energy that can be detected in some parts of the body. There's lots to explore. Make that your range. That's where you're going to wander. It's a limited range, going as far as the skin or a little bit beyond the skin. Sometimes you can sense an energy flowing just around outside the body, like a cocoon. But make that the limit of your wanderings, and try to experience all as aspects of breath. This is what makes it into one object—your sense of the body right here, right now.

As for any pleasures that may come up, any sense of fullness or unusual energies, learn how to deal with them in relationship to the breath. Some people sometimes find a tightness developing in the chest or an energy that seems to come out of left field. Well, think of the tightness coursing out from the chest, going out the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet, so that it doesn't get stuck. Think of everything in terms of breath energy in the body, and that the breath energy is wide open and connected. The more connected everything is, the less need you'll feel for in-and-out breathing, and the stronger that sense of being One in the present moment becomes. The body is one large field of breath. That's one meaning of "singleness of preoccupation." And it's what fills the mind. One of the terms for this is, "mindfulness immersed in the body." You're in the body, thoroughly, totally, with it all around you. As if you're sitting in a tub of water, and the water surrounds you.

Make that your intention; hold to that intention. And you begin to see that intentions really do have a prior power over the results of your past kamma. There may be little pains here and there, noises outside, whatever. But if you hold tight to your intention, those things are not going to lead you astray. You want to have that kind of determination. Because it's only through that kind of determination that the mind really gets solidly established: still, clear, and in a really good position to gain insight. Insights are not things that you can intend ahead of time, but you can intend to get the conditions right. So always hold that in mind as you meditate, that your intention comes first.

Questioning Your Unconscious Actions

December 28, 2015

We practice to overcome our ignorance. What kind of ignorance is it?

The way you normally hear the Buddhist teachings explained, our ignorance is the kind of ignorance of someone coming out of amnesia whose questions are: “Who am I? Where am I?” The answers that are usually given to those questions are these: “Who are you? – You’re a bundle of five aggregates. Where are you? – You’re in samsara.”

But if you look more carefully at how the Buddha taught, those aren’t the questions—and so those aren’t the answers. For example, in the Buddha’s analysis of the five aggregates, they’re not what you are. He said that they’re activities, the activities out of which you create your sense of self, but that you should see them as “not me, not my self, not what I am.” And samsara is not a place. It’s something you do; it’s a wandering-on.

So the real questions aren’t, “Who am I?” or “Where am I?” The real question is, “What am I doing?” That’s a different kind of ignorance. That’s the ignorance of someone who’s been doing something habitually and not really paying much attention, and suddenly realizing that what he’s doing is causing problems.

So as we meditate, that’s what we’re looking at: What are you doing? What have you been doing that’s been causing suffering? Can you see the connection? Can you actually see the action itself? A lot of these actions are subconscious. To see them, you have to get the mind really quiet and have it focused in the right places—and ask the right questions.

When we think about subconscious acts, we usually think about the subconscious or the unconscious, or as things “in my subconscious,” as if it were a room in the mind, like the basement, whereas we’re up here above, in the first or second story. To see the subconscious, we think we have to penetrate the barrier of the floor beneath us. But the unconscious and subconscious are not spaces in the mind. They’re activities that the mind does without being fully conscious of them—and there are a lot of those. If there are walls in the mind that prevent us from seeing them, we’ve put those walls up right before our eyes.

What’s subconscious is not located in any particular hidden place. It’s right here. It’s simply that these things happen very quickly, they happen

very subtly, and we've been doing them for so long that we don't even notice them. They're like the hum of a refrigerator. The refrigerator is right here with us, but it's been on all day, to the point where we don't really notice the hum. One of the reasons we look for inconstancy is to see the moments when the refrigerator turns off. Then you detect: There was something there that you didn't notice because it seemed so constant. This happens on the level of the body; it happens on the level of the mind.

The Buddha talks about bodily fabrication, which is a physical process, although the mind is involved in doing bodily fabrication, through its intentions. He also talks about verbal and mental fabrications, which are more purely aspects of the mind. Bodily fabrication is the way you shape the way you breathe. We're doing this all the time. As the breath comes in, there's going to be something monitoring it that says, "Okay that's enough. Now it's time for it to go out." If you look carefully enough at the mind, you'll notice that there are some perceptions of what level of breathing is enough. Some of this is on the purely chemical level—as when there's too much carbon dioxide in the blood and the brain sends a signal to breathe in. Some of it, though, has more to do with how it feels—what kind of breathing feels satisfying right now. But because our attention is diverted elsewhere, we don't really notice what's going on. We don't notice the extent to which we're shaping this.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has you focus on this as bodily fabrication. He tells you to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, breathe out. As you do that, you begin to notice that there's more going on than just the air coming in and out of the lungs. There's a movement of energy—certain muscles are expanded, stretched; others are contracted. They have a rhythm. But to what extent is that rhythm caused by things going on in the mind that you're not fully aware of?

The best way to see that is to consciously change the way you think about the breath, to change the way you breathe, to go against what's subconscious. That's how you dig up some subconscious assumptions. There's a resistance. What's going on? What's resisting? If you find that you're having trouble adjusting the breath because your perception is off, well, change your perceptions.

This is where mental fabrication comes in and has an influence on bodily fabrication. When you breathe in, where do you think the breath is coming in? How does your mind picture the breathing process? Change the picture. If you're not sure what the picture is, use one of Ajaan Lee's pictures—such as the breath coming in at the base of the skull and going down the

spine, down through the legs; coming in through the middle of the chest and going down through the abdomen. Or you can try other images as well: the breath coming in and out the eyes and going deep into the brain, or coming in through the top of the head and going down into the brain. Change the picture, change the image, and see what that does to the breathing process.

The same with verbal fabrication: You're sitting here telling yourself, "Stay with the breath." There are other parts of the mind that'll say, "No, go someplace else; I've got something else I want to think about." You don't see those other voices clearly until you've made up your mind that you're going to stay with the breath. Normally, we just drift from one thought to another to another. It's like boats out on the ocean: One boat comes near your boat, and you jump onto that boat; and then that boat gets near to another boat, and you jump on that third boat. Everything is just drifting around. It's all so smooth and seamless that it seems like a very natural process. But then you find yourself in the middle of the ocean. If you ask yourself, "Where have I been? How did I get here?" it'd be hard to trace things back.

But if you've got something really solid to hold onto, you can be more conscious of your motions as they bump into your initial intention. Make up your mind that you're going to stay right here with the breath. That gives you a point of comparison. When the mind goes drifting off, you realize that it has drifted.

Some people complain that when they meditate they begin to see what a mess their minds are. Well, the mind has always been a mess; it's not suddenly a mess because you're meditating. Ajaan Fuang's example is of a house that you normally don't clean. One layer of dust settles on the floor today, and then a new layer tomorrow, and a new layer the next day, and you don't see the layers of dust because they're just being added to the dust already there. But if you start cleaning the house, wiping down the floor every day, you notice every little speck of dust as it settles.

It's the same when you use the breath to clean things out. Every time a new thought comes in that's not related to the breath, you're going to notice it. You may not notice it at first—you just kind of slip into it the way you normally have been. But as you get better and better at noticing the mind and noticing the warning signals that the mind is about to leave the breath, those warning signals tell you a lot about what's going on in the mind.

It's as if a discussion took place maybe five minutes ago, and it was decided, "Yes, we're going to leave the breath when we get our first chance." And as soon as there's the slightest little bit of lapse in your mindfulness, you're gone. It's a fait accompli. But once you get sensitive to those little

decisions, you can say No; you can change them in time.

So look for that. The next time you notice that the mind has wandered off and you bring it back, make up your mind that you're going to look for the warning signals. You don't tell yourself, "Okay, I'm going to stay with the breath, I'm never going to leave it this time." You're setting yourself up for a fall. There's a lie that's going on in the mind some place. A wall was put up, and something's sneaking behind the wall. You've got to learn how to pull those walls down. And one of the ways of doing that is to ask, "I want to see the warning signals." As soon as the breath gets little bit wobbly or your focus on the breath gets a little bit wobbly, you have to be extra careful. And you begin to notice that certain decisions are being made—decisions that you weren't aware of before.

It's in this way that we bring things to the conscious level, by laying down a few rules. We say, "We're going to stay right here with the breath." And then watch the mind as it disobeys the rules, to see what kind of reasons it gives. At first it doesn't give any reasons; it just does it right in your face—it suddenly switches off in another direction. But if you can get more and more alert to the little things going on in the mind, the quieter you can get the mind, then the more clearly you can see these little decisions, both with the verbal fabrication and with mental fabrication.

The feelings that come up, the little perceptions that come up, are like the subliminal messages on TV that come very quickly and then disappear. They plant a seed. If you're alert to them, you can wipe out the seed. It doesn't take much. It's harder, though, once the seed has sprouted and turned into a big plant. Then you have to uproot it, because it's established itself. But at the moment when it's still just a seed, it's just a little, tiny decision that was made in the mind, and you can undo the decision right there, if you catch it in time. Otherwise, it starts burrowing around, finding other friends inside the mind, so it has its team, its gang. It's going to gang up on you.

So you begin to see that the subconscious is not a place in the mind. It's not a subterranean dungeon. It's simply the mind's ability to do something very quickly and then to pretend that it has forgotten. But if your mindfulness is more continuous, your alertness is sharper, and you're more and more determined to stay here, then the more clearly you can see those moments in the mind. You see the tricks that the mind plays on itself, the way it hides things from itself, the way it's already shaping things.

In dependent co-arising, the factors of fabrication come prior to sensory contact. In other words, when they're unskillful, when they're done through

ignorance, they've got you primed to suffer no matter what comes to your senses—no matter what you see or hear or smell or taste or touch or think about. Once these little decisions are in place, they've got you primed to suffer. Now, if you can bring awareness and appropriate attention to this process, you can prime the mind in another direction. Appropriate attention is a matter of asking the right questions. Remember, the questions are not, "Who am I?" or "Where am I?" The question is: "What am I doing?" That's how you prime the mind in another direction.

Think about the Buddha on his way to awakening. The questions were never, "Who am I?" or "Where am I?" The question was, "What am I doing?" He tried different methods of meditation, he tried different austerities, and he wasn't getting the results he wanted. So he turned around and said, "What am I doing? What can I change?" To see the little things that the mind was doing, he had to make the mind very, very quiet, in an all-around way.

This is why the meditation involves getting focused on the breath and then being aware of the whole body, because different thoughts get associated with movements of energy in different parts of the body. They leave markers as we hold onto a thought for a bit. If you've got your awareness all around, and you've got the breath energy smoothed out, then there are fewer and fewer places to leave markers, fewer and fewer hiding places for the unskillful thoughts, urges, feelings, and actions with which you shape your experience. When you bring the light of awareness to these things, you can turn fabrication from a cause of suffering into part of the path.

So always remember that the questions are not, "Who am I?" or "Where am I?" The question is, "What am I doing?" And try to be really vigilant in being very precise in your answers. Bring things that the mind has been hiding from itself from behind the walls it's put up and into plain sight. This is what changes fabrication from a problem into the solution to the problem.

So look carefully. No one else can do the looking for you. But if you look in the right places and ask the right questions, you're bound to see.

Protection Through Mindfulness Practice

December 24, 2015

The Buddha often talks about the practice of satipatthana, or the establishing of mindfulness, as a kind of protection. He says that you make yourself a refuge when you practice the establishing of mindfulness. You make yourself an island, a safe place in the middle of the flood.

There's also the passage where he tells the story of two acrobats. As each acrobat maintains his or her own sense of balance, each is protecting him or herself and also provides a protection for the other. This, too, the Buddha then says, is an analogy for the establishing of mindfulness.

So, what kind of protection does mindfulness provide?

Here it's useful to note that when the Buddha talked about the duties of a teacher, one of them is to provide protection for the student in all directions. In his own case, this meant that he gave the student clear reasons for what should and shouldn't be done, lessons that the student could take along wherever he'd go, and that would be valid in whatever direction he went. After all, we go through life active, not passive. We're shaping our experience, so we need guidance as to what ways will provide us with happiness in the long term and help us avoid suffering in the long term.

The main danger in life is our own lack of knowledge in this area—or even worse, believing that our actions don't matter or have no results. That's really dangerous—a lot more dangerous than the dangers other people can pose to us.

So this question of protection has to apply to what you're doing with your mind right now.

This is where the establishing of mindfulness provides a really good protection because when we look at the three qualities that go into establishing mindfulness—ardency, alertness, and mindfulness—we can see that they're not just matters of accepting or resigning ourselves to whatever comes up. They give guidance as to what to do, right here, right now.

Mindfulness is what keeps in mind the ability to recognize things, the labels we have for naming things as they come up in the present moment. That's the first step. The second step is that, once you've recognized what something is, mindfulness reminds you of what should or shouldn't be done with it. It reminds you not only what you've read in the texts or heard from

teachers, but also what you've learned on your own in your practice, as to what works and what doesn't work in giving rise to skillful qualities.

That's how your power of memory is a protector.

Then there's alertness. Alertness watches what's actually happening—and in particular, what you're doing and the results you're getting from what you're doing. You might say that it takes note of what's happening and then sends the information over to mindfulness. Mindfulness then recognizes what's going on and gives instruction as for what should be done. If something is unskillful, and you recognize it as something unskillful, then you remember that it's something you've got to get rid of, and you try to remember how.

And finally ardency is what does what should be done.

So these three qualities working together all provide you with your own protection. And their interaction goes further.

Once ardency has done something well, alertness notes that. When it's done something not so well, alertness will note that, too. Then you send that information off to mindfulness to remember.

So you want to strengthen these qualities as much as you can, because if you're missing any of them, you're left without protection. Each of them provides protection in its own particular way.

For example, in some cases you may not be able to recognize if something is skillful or not. You can't recognize what's happening—and in this case, your protection is to be really, really alert.

That means that you have to watch it for a while, as in Ajaan Mun's advice to Ajaan Maha Boowa: If something comes up in your meditation and you're not sure about it, watch it. Stay with that sense of awareness—the observer, the knower—and don't be too quick to come to any conclusions until you can see what's actually happening. Ultimately, you'll recognize it as something skillful or unskillful, something to be developed or something to be abandoned, but be careful not to jump too quickly to conclusions.

That's alertness over the long term.

There are also the times when alertness has to be very quick—as in Upasika Kee's advice: When something comes up in the meditation that seems really good, or an insight comes up that's really compelling, note what happens immediately after that. In other words, you've got to be alert continuously. You can't go riding with a sense of, say, pride, or a sense of total conviction in the insight. Look for cause and effect in the very act of having an insight. Try to see what happens as a result of believing that

insight.

So, there are times when alertness provides protection by being long-term, and other times when it provides protection by being very quick.

You really can't lack any of these three qualities. If you forget what you've learned from the past, you're totally defenseless. At the same time, if you know what should be done but you don't carry it through, then you're not really protecting yourself, either. So you have to work on all these three qualities together.

One main problem is that when something comes up in the mind we tend to think of it in terms of our own vocabulary. Lust comes up and our vocabulary says that it's something good. Anger comes up and even though part of us may think that it's not all that good, another part of us really likes it.

This is why mindfulness, remembering the Buddha's vocabulary for these things, has to be strong. It enables you to recognize when there's something that, for the sake of the practice, you don't want to follow and it reminds you of the tools you have to deal with it.

When lust comes up, for instance, the mind can create all kinds of reasons for why the object of lust is really attractive. You've got to remember to recognize it as a hindrance, and to recall that if you follow through with it, it's going to create a lot of trouble.

Among the tools that mindfulness can use to help you here is the ability to remember that lust has its dangers. Here it's good to think of all the stupid things people do under the power of lust—and the awful situations they get themselves into, getting tied down to a person they thought was attractive, and then discovering what else there is in that person: the person's background, personality, family, all the connections that come bundled with that person. That helps you realize how risky it is.

When this really hits home, you'll be a little more likely to want to actually apply that meditation in the chant right now, on the different parts of the body. First think about your own body: What's in there that's really worthy of lust? Take out all the parts and examine them to see which of them could be really attractive.

Only then do you apply the same contemplation to the other person—which is what makes it fair. In other words, you're not saying that the other gender or the other person is the bad one. Your body, too, has the same sort of stuff.

But as the Buddha says, this analysis is going to work only if you have an alternative source of pleasure. This is why we work with the breath. The two

contemplations have to go together.

All too often, when you're really tired or stressed out, you say to yourself that the pleasure that comes from the lust is really worth it; it's something you really need; you want your quick fix.

But if you can take a few minutes to stop and just breathe in a way that's really refreshing, really nourishing, you give yourself some relief, you give yourself some strength, you give yourself some food, and then that enables you to say to yourself, "Actually, I don't really need that other kind of pleasure after all."

This is why ardency in developing concentration can be your first-line protection against lust. As the Buddha said, you can know all the drawbacks of sensuality but if you don't have an alternative form of pleasure, all that knowledge is worthless. So ardency here also has to develop concentration, a sense of non-sensual well-being, working with the breath.

We've talked for the last couple of days in the Q & A about different ways of working with the breath energy, and it's important to take some time to explore this aspect of your relationship to your body. What kind of movement of the breath is actually helpful? What kind of movement of the breath makes it more difficult to stay with the body?

And learn to play. Take the breath energy in the body as your playground here and be open to new ideas about how the breath energy can move.

You'll notice, in Ajaan Lee's basic instructions, that he talks about the breath energy going down the spine and down the legs as you breathe in. But it can also do that as you breathe out. There are other times when he talks about the breath energy starting in the soles of the feet, coming up the legs and up the spine, in the other direction.

You may read in manuals on Tai Chi that there's an energy circle running from the navel down to the spot between the legs and then back up the spine, and down the front of the torso to the navel. But in your own case, you may find that, as you breathe in, a certain part of the energy can run a circle that goes up the front and down the back, or up the back and down the front, whichever way you want the energy to go.

There are lots of different ways you can work with the energy. Don't limit yourself. The more variety you can find in dealing with the breath, the more intriguing it will be to stay with the body—and the more you'll be able to find a sense of well-being for the body, giving it just what it needs at any particular time.

This allows you to step back, say, from your anger or lust, and look at the

other physical and mental symptoms that you've put together to create that lustful or angry state to begin with.

After all, these are things that we fabricate. We're really good at putting them together. A little sensation here, a little sensation there, you tie them together, and there you are: Lust is overcoming you. It's laid claim to your body and to your mind. You've suddenly got all that pressure inside that you've got to do something about.

The same with anger: This person did that and that and that, and then you can stitch all the "thats" together into a big story and it gets your blood boiling.

There was a report recently about how people with strong bouts of anger are more likely to have a heart attack a couple of hours later. The researchers said they didn't know what the connection was, although it's pretty obvious. We stitch all these things together and then all the stitched-together parts block the energy flow, pressure builds up, and something explodes. All it takes is a little random sensation here and there—and the mind has learned how to be really good at stitching them into a web to catch itself. We've been doing this for who knows how many lifetimes.

But if you have a sense of well-being with the breath, then you can step back from these fabrications. You begin to take them apart—to cut, cut, cut through all the connections you've created.

Ask yourself: What was the first sensation in the body? What was the first little thought in the mind?—the little whisper of thought that suggested that lust might be a good antidote for whatever sense of irritation you're feeling, or that anger would be an appropriate response for what someone's done.

And how does that work its way through your inner bureaucracy?—influencing this person, that person inside, all those committee members working together, creating little sensations here and there, and all of a sudden you've got a full blown case. If you want to believe their propaganda when that happens, you're throwing away your protection.

Your protection is to remind yourself, "This is an unskillful state," and you have to be alert.

One of the things you remember with mindfulness is that if you stay with the body—or in particular, stay with the breath—you're going to be here in the present moment. That way, when these things happen, you'll see them in time and you'll be alert to upcoming trends. If you see that things are going in a bad direction, you can turn them around.

This is how these three qualities keep spinning around the mind and the

body, working to give you the protection you need from things like lust, aversion, delusion, greed—all the unskillful things that come welling up inside, that you’ve been so good at creating and that create so many dangers for yourself.

This is why, when Ajaan Lee was writing about the establishing of mindfulness, he kept hammering away at these three qualities: mindfulness, alertness, ardency; mindfulness, alertness, ardency. They lie at the essence of how the establishing of mindfulness can provide you with a protection and be your refuge, your island in the middle of the river—or, as they say in another passage in the Canon, your island in the middle of a lake.

The lake is rising, but you’ve got this island that provides you with a refuge so that you don’t have to drown in the lake. So don’t abandon it.

Think of that image of the quail being hunted by a hawk. As long as the quail stays in its safe territory, the hawk can’t get it. But as soon as it wanders out, there’s no guarantee. And what does it mean to wander out of your safe territory? To get fascinated with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—all the raw materials for things like passion and aversion. If you do that, the hawk can get you. But if you stay in your proper territory, the establishing of mindfulness, you’re safe.

Of course, it’s not just a place. It’s also a combination of activities here in the mind. They’re your protectors. So nourish them well.

Recollection of the Buddha

October 30, 2014

Recollection of the Buddha is one of the guardian meditations. What does it guard you from? It guards you from your own defilements. It's good to stop and think about the Buddha, because he sets the pattern for what we're doing here in our practice.

If you look around the world to see who you might want to take as an example, you can't find a better one. As you reflect on the Buddha, it gives rise to conviction, which is one of the inner strengths that keeps you on the path, keeps you going.

And it also gives you a sense of direction. We're not just trusting the Buddha, we're trusting in his awakening: that he really was awakened, he knew what he was talking about, he really was able to find a deathless element inside that led to true peace, true happiness, an end of suffering. And as a teacher he was very wise. He knew which issues to take up, which issues to put aside, how to frame issues so that they would actually be helpful in leading to the end of suffering.

There are so many issues you can get involved in, so many debates, so many lines of thinking, lines of exploration you can follow that would pull you away from the main issue, which is the end of suffering. And even with issues that are related to the end of suffering, you can frame them in ways that pull you away.

So the Buddha was wise not only in what he taught but also what he didn't teach, how he framed what he taught.

Ajaan Suwat used to say that if you don't believe anybody else, if you don't trust anybody else, at least trust the Buddha. Place yourself in his hands. You put yourself in good hands. You follow what he taught and you can't go wrong.

So it's good to contemplate this on a regular basis. There are a lot of people who say, "Well, the Buddha was okay for his time and place, but now we live in a modern world and there are certain assumptions we have to hold to as part of being modern people." I never knew that I had checked in to the human world on the condition that I had to accept a modern worldview. One of the facts of the modern world is that we're exposed to lots of different teachings. And so we have the right to choose our assumptions,

what we're going to assume is a well-lived life, what we're going to assume is a good example for how we live.

We have the choice. And there's nothing that commits us to an otherwise modern worldview. So there's no need to say, "We have to strip away the Buddha's teachings," in the same way you might pluck a chicken, leaving only the parts that fit into a modern worldview.

After all, the modern worldview is one that's creating a lot of suffering for us. If you believe that all you are is a body and that your consciousness is just an epiphenomenon, as they call it—a side effect of there being a body—then you can't really believe that by training the mind you're going to have any impact on anything at all—because in the materialist view, the only reality is physical reality. Yet if you believe that the physical reality is the only one, it makes you miserable. What can you do? You're stuck.

Now some people like to be stuck. It lets them off the hook; they don't have to be responsible for their choices. But that's a miserable place to be stuck.

Just look at your mind. What does your mind deal in? It deals with meanings. Someone can say a word and it will have a huge impact on what goes on in your mind. Now, physically, the word itself is what? Sound waves hitting the ear, that's it. We can take the same word, so that the sound waves are the same, but if you put it in one language, it means one thing; if you put it in another one it means something else. And if everything were just physical, how could that be? How could there be meanings? The mind deals with meanings. So take on the meaning of what the Buddha said, that it is possible to find a true happiness and it's possible to do it from within: in other words, by changing your mind with your mind.

Now that doesn't fit in with a lot of modern materialist assumptions, but again, why are we committed to, say, a materialist assumption just because we're born in this time and place? We have the right to choose any assumptions that help alleviate suffering now and on into the future.

So the Buddha's assumptions are really wise. And as for parts of the teaching that people would have us put aside, the Buddha had good reasons for teaching them.

Take, for instance, the whole issue of the different levels of being. I have a student who started meditating on his own when he was a teenager. He started sensing beings around him. Having been raised in the Catholic Church, all he knew was that spiritual beings came in only two sorts, really good or really bad, and there was nothing in-between. And these certainly didn't look like the good ones, so he flipped out. As a result, he stopped

meditating.

Later, after he realized that there are other ways of looking at these beings—that there are all kinds of beings out there, good, bad, and all the shades in between—he was able to start meditating again without fear of what he was seeing. The Buddha gives you instructions on how to deal with beings like this: how not to be overcome by them; how not to be afraid of them; how to be wary around them even as you wish them well; how to protect yourself from them. These are all there in the teaching.

And the worldview the Buddha gives in this regard is very useful. There are not just angels or demons. There are lots of different levels, with beings at many stages in terms of their goodness and knowledge. It's like having lots of different kinds of neighbors, the same as you'd have in the human realm. So that worldview can be extremely useful for people who are sensitive in this way.

So when we recollect the Buddha, we realize that our conviction in his awakening is our protection. There are a lot of things we don't know in life, but we have to make assumptions in order to function. We have our choice of assumptions, and the assumptions the Buddha recommends make sense. He's not asking you to believe anything impossible. He's asking you to believe in the power of your own action. He also gives specific guidance in how best to act, so you don't have to reinvent the Dhamma wheel every time you start practicing.

So this recollection of the Buddha is a good protection. It protects us from that attitude that says, "Well, if I don't know something, I'm not going to believe it." The fact is, there are a lot of things that you don't know. If you start examining your beliefs, you realize that you make lots of assumptions as you go through the day. So you might as well adopt some assumptions that have been tried and passed the test. The people who say that the Buddha's really worthless: They themselves, as people, aren't very impressive.

For instance, it was Ajaan Suwat who said, "If you don't believe anybody, at least believe the Buddha." He himself had believed the Buddha all the way down the line and he benefitted greatly from it. And he was a very inspiring example—much more inspiring than the people who would say, "Well, pick and choose; take what you like and throw away what you don't like."

This is how we protect ourselves from ourselves. We protect the good part inside us, the part that wants to find a true happiness, and we protect it from all the greed and aversion and delusion and laziness and other unskillful qualities that would pull us away.

So recollection of the Buddha is one of the most important weapons in our arsenal. Bring it out to use on a regular basis, and you'll find that it gives energy and safety to your practice.

The World of Conviction

March 27, 2017

One of the mind's habits is to create states of becoming, involving both the world outside and your own inner world, the world of the mind. You start with a desire and then, based on that desire, you take on an identity in a specific world of experience. If you have a desire for pizza, the "you" in that world is going to be both the "you" that's going to enjoy the pizza when you get it and the "you" that can get the pizza. You have the skills, or you have the wherewithal, to get it for yourself. That's a self as producer. The one who's going to taste the pizza, that's the self as consumer.

As for the world, once you've focused on that desire, everything in the world that's relevant to that desire actually forms the world in that becoming. Whatever is either going to help you get the pizza, or get in the way of getting the pizza, forms the foreground. Everything else falls into the background. Everything else in your own personal identity that's irrelevant to that desire at that point falls into the background, too.

Then when you move on to another desire, there's another becoming with another you and a different world. The mind's doing this all the time.

And then on the larger scale, there's the "you" here as a human being, along with the world outside that you're inhabiting as a human being: That's also a kind of becoming. One of the Buddha's main insights was that these two are connected. The identity that you have as a human being right now is based on a lot of the becomings you had in the past in your mind.

And, as the Buddha said, this process of becoming entails suffering, because that desire, when you cling to it, is going to be uncertain. The clinging, too, is uncertain. It's going to be unstable. So anything built around that, anything that gathers around that, will have to be unstable as well. This is why clinging lies at the essence of suffering.

But it also turns out that you need to develop certain becomings in order to practice. The "you" who's here meditating, the inner world of your mind that you're inhabiting right now, along with the world of the breath, should be prominent, and other things should fall into the background. The concentration you're aiming at, too, is a kind of becoming. In fact, you actually see the process of becoming very clearly as you try to meditate because, as you often discover, when you're trying to stay with the breath all of a sudden you find yourself off in some other place in a different world.

That's because a different desire took over and a new you formed around that, a new world formed around that, and took you off.

So you keep trying to re-establish yourself here—not only as you're meditating, but also as you go through the world and keep trying to practice. The “you” as a meditator is something you want to encourage, something you want to nourish: the you that can do this.

The Canon encourages that kind of thinking, “Other people can do this. Why can't I?” The Buddha also encourages you to remember that you've embarked on this practice because you want to get past suffering. If you find yourself wanting to leave the practice or to slack off, then you have to ask yourself, “Don't you really love yourself? Don't you really care about yourself?” This is called the self as a governing principle.

So these are forms of self-ing—or I-making and my-making in the Buddha's terms—that are actually helpful on the path.

But there's also the process of world-making. What kind of world can you inhabit that's going to be helpful for the path? Here at the monastery, we have the context of the monastery. But when you leave, you've got to take a world with you.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha talks about the five strengths or the five faculties. These are qualities that nourish the mind and nourish the kind of becoming that you want as a practitioner as you go through the world.

Both lists—the strengths and the faculties—begin with conviction: conviction in the Buddha's awakening, that he really was awakened. If you hold onto that conviction, it creates a different world around you. You see things through that lens, and they're going to look different from what they would have if you lived in a world where no one had ever awakened through his or her own efforts.

What does it mean to have conviction in the Buddha's awakening? Well, it comes down to conviction in the principle of action, that your actions really do make a difference. They can make such a huge difference that they can actually put an end to suffering. And you can do this on your own. After all, the Buddha did it on his own. Even though he said that the whole of the holy life lies in having admirable friends, the admirable friends are there simply to point out the way and to give good advice; to set good examples. But the actual work is something you have to do. You have to do it on your own.

This is the message of the Buddha's awakening. And you notice, if you look through Buddhist history, that when people try to change the Dhamma

—especially into forms that said, “You can’t do this on your own. You need some outside power to come and help you”—they also change the story of the Buddha’s awakening.

There’s one version where, as the Bodhisatta’s sitting under the tree, he doesn’t gain awakening there. He gets spirited up to the Pure Abodes. There he gets surrounded by Buddhas of the past who beam awakening into his head. Then he comes back down. In other words, in that version, he didn’t do it on his own. There’s another version where he actually was awakened before he left home. He was having tantric sex in the palace with a consort and, through tantric sex, he appealed to the Buddhas of the past who shared their awakening with him. Then he went out and sat under the Bodhi tree as a show for people who might be inspired by that kind of thing.

So, you can see how important the story of the Buddha’s awakening is in creating the world in which you practice.

Recently, I was reading a secular Buddhist version of the Buddha’s life, in which there actually was no awakening. The Buddha was just a well-meaning sort of guy who thought about things a lot and was very sensitive, and finally he decided that each of us has to be true to ourselves and find a path, our own path, for ourselves. Nobody else can tell us what the path should be. But unfortunately, he was not a good teacher, and the monks took his teachings and distorted them, telling us that there was an awakening, and a specific truth to the awakening, and that there was a path that worked for everybody.

What kind of world would that be, if nobody ever really gained awakening? A pretty hopeless one. If you really are serious about putting an end to suffering, conviction in the original story of the Buddha’s awakening creates a new world around you. You see your life as an opportunity to develop the qualities that he developed.

In the Canon, when the Buddha talks about the qualities that led him to awakening, they come down to being heedful, ardent, and resolute. When you believe that the Buddha really did gain awakening through these qualities, it encourages you to develop those qualities in your life as well: heedful to take care in what you do; ardent to give rise to what’s good in any circumstance; resolute to keep from being swayed by your defilements and other people’s opinions. This is especially important as we live here in this land of wrong view, where truth gets turned into truthiness, the virtues are called into question, and everybody says, “Well, just find your own way and go for the immediate hit.” And they accuse Buddhism of being pessimistic. The Buddha’s actually saying, “Look. Through your efforts, you can gain

true happiness. You can put an end to all suffering. Here's how it's done, and human beings can do it."

That's the other message of the Buddha's awakening: that it is possible for us to touch a deathless dimension within the mind. The path can take us there. Sometimes you hear the question, "How can a human being, which is a conditioned being, know something unconditioned?" That wasn't the Buddha's approach. Instead of trying to define what a human being is and, from that, what a human being can know, his approach was to begin with, "What can a human being know?" And then, after that, if you want, you can define what a human being is. But he found that by defining yourself in any way you're placing limitations on yourself. So why bother trying to define yourself?

But if you focus on developing a general sense of yourself as capable, as willing to take responsibility for your actions and to learn from mistakes—simple things like that, which involve a quality of integrity: That kind of self can actually take you to the point where you don't need it anymore. Because, after all, why do we create selves in our becomings? Because we want happiness based on our desires, and we need a sense of the self as producer and self as consumer to achieve what we want. But when you get to a happiness that doesn't require any conditions, you don't have to create any sense of self around it. That's why the Buddha gave the teaching on not-self. But to get to the point where you apply not-self to everything, you have to learn how to create a good self, a skillful sense of self and, at the same time, have a skillful sense of the world around you, a world in which awakening is possible.

Now this is a matter of conviction. You're not going to know the truth of the Buddha's awakening until you find awakening yourself. But faith in awakening before that point is not the kind of faith where you're being asked to believe anything unreasonable. It's a reasonable working hypothesis, which helps get you on the path, keeps you on the path, and leaves the possibility of awakening open. If you take that other working hypothesis—that nobody ever has really gained awakening, that it's all just a bunch of made-up stuff—that closes all the doors.

So you have to decide, which kind of person do you want to be? And which kind of world do you want to live in? You do have that much of a choice. You can create an environment for your practice in this way, based on your conviction. You may find that you'll be living in a world that's different from the worlds of the people around you, but we're already living in worlds different from theirs, the worlds of our own becomings. The

question is, in creating your becomings, do you want to follow their worlds, with their limited possibilities? Or do you want to live in the world of the Buddha, in which the possibilities are wide open and you're capable? The choice is yours.

And since we're already creating worlds of becoming and selves of becoming over and over again—and suffering as a result—why not create a becoming that leaves the potential open to get beyond becoming and suffering altogether? It gives a new meaning to your self-ing and it gives a new meaning to the world-ing that you do. It leaves open the possibility that there are other dimensions of the mind aside from the worlds we keep creating for ourselves. There's a dimension that's lokuttara, above worlds, a dimension that's unfabricated, ultimate happiness, ultimate truth, ultimate freedom.

Conviction in the Buddha's awakening leaves that dimension as a possibility. A world without that awakening closes that possibility off. So remember that you're making the choice all the time: What kind of world are you going to live in? And what kind of person are you going to be in that world? Don't let other people make that choice for you. Listen to the part of your heart that says, "I want true happiness. I want to find it in a way that's harmless and wise." And you find that conviction in the Buddha's awakening helps you achieve that desire.

Pleasant Practice, Painful Practice

August 6, 2015

There's a sad story about a young American who went to Thailand and became a monk. He went to stay with Ajaan Maha Boowa, and one of the first questions he asked Ajaan Maha Boowa on arrival was, "What meditation theme can I follow that will lead me to awakening?" Ajaan Maha Boowa said, "I don't know. You have to find out for yourself." Unfortunately, the young monk thought that Ajaan Maha Boowa was saying that he didn't know the way to awakening, so he got discouraged, left, and ended up disrobing. He tried Zen for several years, disrobed from that, and ended up being a professor of Buddhist studies here in the States.

The sad thing, of course, is that he misinterpreted Ajaan Maha Boowa's statement. Ajaan Maha Boowa didn't say that he didn't know the way to awakening. What he didn't know was which technique would work specifically for that young monk, seeing that there's no one technique guaranteed to take every meditator to stream entry or once returning or non-returning or arahantship. The technique that works for each individual person is a matter of individual temperament.

There are two main practices, as the Buddha defines them: painful practice and pleasant practice. By this he doesn't mean that you sit here with a lot of pain or with a lot of pleasure. Painful practice means having to contemplate themes like death or the unattractiveness of the body as your main meditation theme. This kind of practice is painful because it's mentally painful. Pleasant practice has to do with getting into the jhanas and working with the sense of ease and refreshment that come from getting the mind really still.

Now, this doesn't mean that body contemplation doesn't get you into jhana. In both cases, the Buddha said, what determines whether your practice is going to be pleasant or painful is which kind of contemplation leads you to develop the five strengths and the five faculties: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. "Concentration" in both cases means the jhanas, but the theme leading you to develop those jhanas, and from there on into discernment, is something that varies.

Some people can just work with the jhana itself. You look at whatever state of concentration you have settled into and you examine it to see:

Where is there still any stress here? You look for what you might be doing to cause the stress, and you notice that by keeping track of the rise and fall of the level of stress in the mind while it's in concentration. If you catch the activity of the mind that brings on the stress, drop that activity right then and there. When you do this, you're learning the basic skill that will take you all the way, at the very least, to stream entry, because it's all about seeing and developing dispassion for the activities of the mind.

The same holds true with the concentration that comes from contemplating the body. At first, you're focused on your image of the body. But then there comes the question, "What makes you want to give rise to, say, a perception of the body as unattractive, and what makes you want to develop a perception of it as attractive? What's the instigator? And what is this thing, this perception of attractive and not attractive?" You learn to turn around and look at that. Take that apart.

In both cases, you're learning how to look at the role of perception in your mind, along with the role of feeling and fabrication, which are the central aggregates in any attempt to free the mind from the aggregates. That makes you more and more sensitive to what the mind is doing to deceive and create unnecessary suffering for itself.

As for which of the two main types you fall into, you don't know that beforehand. This is one of the reasons why we practice both body contemplation and breath meditation.

Contemplate the 32 parts of the body. You can add other parts of the body if you like. For some reason, eyes are not mentioned in the list, but if you want, you can visualize them to yourself: what the eyes look like without the eyelids. Or you can just go down the standard list. When you focus on a particular body part, ask yourself, "Where in my sense of the body sitting right here is that part right now?" This is to drive home the fact that the body part is not just something in an anatomy chart or a photo. It's something right here in your body. You've been living with your liver, you've been living with your lungs all this time without really thinking much about them. So go through the various parts until you find one part that really captures your interest, that really seems to hit you: "My gosh, my body has that, too, and I've been carrying it around right inside me"—anything that helps you question your attachment to the body, so that you can stop taking it for granted that your body's a really cool thing.

This is not to say the body's a bad thing. After all, you've got to use the body for the practice. What you're trying to cut through are all your unhealthy positive and negative images of your body. Unhealthy negative

images center on the idea that, “It’s just me who’s ugly. My body’s not beautiful like all those other people I see in the media.” An unhealthy positive image is saying, “I’ve got this really cool body here. I’m pretty sharp. People find me attractive, so my body must make me better than other people.” Both of those are unhealthy because they lead to unhealthy mind-states. A healthy positive image is that “I’ve got a body that I can practice with.” A healthy negative image is one that says, “We’re all equal in terms of what we’ve got in our bodies and none of the parts are really all that attractive when you take them out. So the value of the body doesn’t lie in its appearance. It lies in what you do with it.”

It’s good to do this practice on a regular basis to help loosen your attachment to the body. It helps with a lot of defilements, not just with your attachment to lust. It’s interesting to note that the Buddha’s analysis of lust is that you start with your attraction to your own body and then you transfer that to the body of the opposite sex or whatever the sex you’re attracted to. But it starts with your own body. This analysis is not just for lust. It’s also for pride, such as the pride of racism. Skin is just skin, and nobody’s skin is attractive when it’s put in a pile. Whatever kind of attachment you have to the body—it may be the unwillingness to do without food or to do without sleep for fear that it’s going to harm the body—you tell yourself, “Well, the body’s here to be used. And there comes a point where you’re going to have to throw it away anyhow. So use it in a good way while you can.”

People put so much energy into trying to preserve their bodies. But what are they preserving them for, usually? In most cases, they’re just preserving them so they look good until they admit to themselves that they can’t really look good anymore. That doesn’t accomplish anything. So you have to ask yourself, “To what extent am I unwilling to use the body for something that will really have a good impact on the mind?” Then look at the various parts of the body and see that there’s really nothing here that’s worth holding onto for its own sake. Learn to see the body as a tool.

This is all very helpful, even if your basic practice is pleasant. Regardless of whether a painful or a pleasant theme ultimately sparks your awakening, either way you’ve got to do this kind of contemplation on a regular basis.

The same in the other case: Even if your practice is painful, the Buddha says that you’ve got, at the very least, to have the breath as your escape, because there are times when body contemplation can get the mind really disturbed. It can lead to unskillful mind-states, and that’s when you’ve got to drop that theme for the time being and come back to the breath. Give yourself a sense of well-being, of refreshing the mind, because the mind

needs its refreshment on the path.

After all, it's going to be feeding anyhow. And if it doesn't have something really good to feed on in terms of the concentration, it's going to go slipping out, jumping over the wall, finding something outside to feed off of, to find its hit of pleasure. So give it something good right here, something that's visceral, immediate, and skillful; something that helps anchor you in the present moment and puts you in a position where you really can see what's going on in the mind—because the breath is the closest thing in the body to the mind.

It's through the breath, or the energy of the breath, that you can actually move your body and be sensitive to what's going on in the body. So staying with the breath focuses you right next to the mind, at the same time creating a good relationship between the body and the mind.

So whether your practice is going to be painful or pleasant, it's good to have some experience with both sides, both because nobody can know which side you're on, and because it helps give balance to both sides.

Be alive to the fact that there are lots of different ways, lots of different themes for training the mind. There are many different themes in the suttas. It's even possible to work with metta or any of the brahma-viharas as the basis for your concentration. As long as you then use that concentration as a basis for further developing the factors for awakening—and in particular, discernment about what you're doing as you create a state of mind—that, too, can be one of the pleasant ways of gaining awakening.

But it all has to come down to your ability to watch your own mind as it's creating unnecessary stress and suffering through its perceptions and feelings and fabrications here in the present moment. Whichever theme leads you to that level of awareness and makes it easy for you to see what you're doing and where the unnecessary stress is and how you don't have to create it: That'll be the method that works. A part of the Buddha's greatness as a teacher was his realization that there are many different personality tendencies and his ability to provide different ways of dealing with your different tendencies so that regardless of your tendency, there is a way for you to reach awakening.

Goodwill as Restraint

July 25, 2015

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about the development of goodwill—and by implication all the other sublime attitudes—as a form of restraint. We don't usually think about goodwill in those terms. We think of it more as an opening of the heart, letting all its natural goodness come pouring out. But then, of course, the Buddha never said anything about natural goodness. He said the mind is very changeable. It's capable of all kinds of things and it can change so quickly that even saying, "in the flash of an eye" is too slow. And as for pouring out, that's what the word *asava* means—effluent—and that's something we're trying to overcome.

So what are we restraining as we develop goodwill? Basically, if we have thoughts of ill will in the mind, they're going to come pouring out in our actions. And so, instead of just holding the ill will in mind as you try to prevent it from affecting your actions, you try to nip it in the bud. You're sitting here and things come up in your mind about something that someone did, or someone else said, and it gets you really worked up. You need a way to restrain yourself. And that's what goodwill is for.

Similarly, the idea of wanting to do harm to somebody may come up. You need compassion—again, both for yourself and for the other person. Resentment comes up for somebody's good fortune: You feel they got something that you should have had, or you see that they've got some position that you don't think they deserve. Well, develop empathetic joy. If any aversion comes up for anybody, the Buddha says to develop equanimity.

They're all very interesting pairings: especially the equanimity for aversion. We're usually told that goodwill is the antidote for anger. But sometimes there are cases where someone has done something and it's really hard to feel goodwill for that person. But at the very least you can say, "Okay, I'm just not going to get involved for the time being." And remember that everybody has his or her own *kamma*.

But there's another kind of restraint as well. And that has to do with remembering that you've done wrong to somebody and you want to resolve not to do it again. This is where the Buddha again recommends developing all the *brahma-viharas* as a way of maintaining the vow you've made to restrain yourself from making that same mistake in the future.

When you've wronged somebody else, it's very easy to start thinking that you're a really bad person, and that gets you down. And then, to get out of that mood, you start telling yourself, "Well, maybe the other person deserved what I did." But you don't want to think in that way, either. So you have to develop goodwill for both sides.

Goodwill for yourself means what? Thinking about what genuine happiness comes from and what you need to do in order to find it. And making the resolve that you really do want to find that happiness.

Goodwill for other people, of course, means that you don't want to harm them and you don't want to get them to do harm, either, because that would get in the way of their true happiness. Of course, they have their own free will to make choices, but to whatever extent you can have an influence, you want to make that influence good.

And remember that the goodwill is there for you. Even though you're directing it to somebody else, it's for the sake of your own skillfulness. Because as you train the mind, there are going to be a lot of things you're going to have to give up: habits you've developed over the years—ways of thinking, ways of speaking, ways of acting. You've got to exercise more restraint over them.

One of the reflections that the Buddha has the monks think of every day is, "Now that I've changed my status, I have to change my way of acting." You look around, you see how the other monks are behaving and, if it's not inspiring, you ask yourself, "Is that the way I behave? Do I still have some rough edges that I need to polish off, file down?"

And you learn to do this in a way where you don't feel like you have to hold yourself in and explode. You want to get to the root—i.e., to develop a skillful attitude, which is that you want true happiness, and that true happiness makes lots of demands. It's not that we just simply follow our own habitual nature and everything's going to be fine. There are a lot of areas where the practice requires that we not follow our habits, that we not follow our strong urges.

You can't think that the mind is naturally good and so therefore you can trust everything that comes out of it when it quiets down. The mind has all kinds of potentials inside. Just because something feels natural or normal doesn't mean that it's going to be good for you. It's just what you've been accustoming yourself to.

So whatever you have to give up, try to do it with an attitude of goodwill. Have some good humor about it as well. Learn to see the bad side of the habits you're having to abandon so that you don't feel like you're giving up

anything essential or valuable, anything really worth holding onto.

After all, true happiness is not an easy thing. There are very quick pleasures you can get very easily, but they usually turn into something else—and pleasures that turn are like milk that turns. They don't turn into anything good. But genuine happiness is something else. It lasts. It doesn't turn. But it requires training.

Goodwill is a form of concentration, and that requires restraint. You don't let your mind wander off into other areas. If you do find some ill will creeping in, or the desire to do harm or to see somebody being harmed, or resentment or aversion, you've got to look into it for the purpose of training yourself out of it. You don't just spread thoughts of "May all beings be happy, happy, happy, happy!" to smother it. That may work for a few minutes but it doesn't really get to the problem, which is that you're holding onto some sort of attitude that's related to wrong view.

And thinking that someone deserves to suffer is not a right view of any kind at all. The whole purpose of the teaching is that although people are suffering, they don't have to suffer. In other words, the Buddha's saying they don't deserve to suffer. Even though they've done bad in the past, that doesn't mean that they deserve to suffer. Even if you've done bad things in the past, you don't deserve to suffer. We can all change our ways.

This is one of the basic assumptions that the Buddha worked on. If people couldn't change their ways, he said there would be no purpose in teaching them. But people can. They can learn to be more skillful and to drop unskillful things.

So that's the attitude you should have toward everybody. If they're doing something really unskillful, make the wish, "May they learn how to stop that." And if you're in a position to have any influence over that person, try to use it skillfully. If not, you just hold that thought in the mind to influence your own actions toward that person. Because the fact that the mind changes so easily means that you can't really trust it until you've reached at least the first level of awakening. It can always turn around very quickly.

So you've got to do whatever you can to make sure that you can really trust yourself. And one of the ways of doing that is by developing the restraint that comes with goodwill. You're not going to go into thoughts of ill will. Or if thoughts of ill will do come up, you're going to deal with them, try to root them out—because if you let any ill will linger in your mind, it might come out in ways that you might not anticipate. It comes out in times of weakness, times when you're feeling threatened. It comes out in times of fear.

You've got to learn how to defend yourself from unskillful behavior that would come at any of those times, so that even when you're feeling weak and threatened and fearful, you hold onto the principle, "I want genuine happiness"—which may require some sacrifices.

And number one is that you have to sacrifice anything unskillful you might do to get out of a difficult situation. There are some difficult situations you have to learn how to accept because you can't think of any skillful way out. In cases like that, you have to put up with the difficulty. You need to honor the principle of skillfulness more than your dislike of difficulty. That's a form of restraint that's hard but really important.

One of the reasons the precepts are so simple is that when they're simple, they're easy to keep in mind. If they were very complex, your tendency to make excuses for yourself would slip into the folds of the complexity. You'd have to consult scholars at times when you don't have time to consult scholars—when danger is staring you in the face and you've got to make a decision right here, right now. And scholars who like to make the precepts complex shouldn't be trusted anyhow.

So you simply keep remembering, "I'm not going to do anything that's going to harm myself and I'm not going to do anything that harms others." And it's interesting: From the Buddha's point of view, harming yourself means engaging in things like killing, stealing, having illicit sex, breaking any of the precepts. Harming others is getting them to do those things. In other words, you treat people not simply as objects of your actions. They're agents, too. They have free will, too. So you don't want to influence their choices in a bad way, because that's what's going to create suffering for them down the line.

All this is very basic, but it's good to remember the basics every now and then, because it's very easy to cover up the basics with lots of rhetoric. Fancy words can sound very high and very noble. They can justify war, justify stealing, justify illicit sex, justify lying. The mind can create excuses for all kinds of behavior and make it sound very advanced and compassionate and spiritual. But it's not.

Keep the basics in mind and try to keep your mind at a basic level. That way, it's hard to go wrong.

So we don't pretend that we're all innately good or bad or that we're all One. Each of us has an element of free will that we have to respect. And each of us can do all kinds of things. In that possibility, you can see both danger and a potential, a potential for good. But to develop the potential for good, we have to keep the mind's potential to endanger itself in line.

So we develop goodwill as a type of restraint. It gets the mind thinking in the right terms: in terms of the causes and effects of happiness.

As for the case of resentment—in other words, the attitude that empathetic joy is supposed to overcome—developing empathetic joy teaches us there's nothing in the world worth resenting. We shouldn't see other people's good fortune as making anything less of us. We're not here to compete. We're here to work on our own unskillful habits and develop whatever skillful qualities we can. So resentment doesn't make any sense at all.

When you can think in those terms, you can trust yourself a lot more.

Cultivate a Limitless Heart

November 24, 2015

We each have our own sufferings that no one else can feel. And the work to put an end to suffering is often something that no one else can even see. As we're focused on our own issues, things can get very narrow. On the one hand, it's good that the sufferings that weigh down the mind are things that come from within, because otherwise we'd have to depend on help from somebody else outside to put an end to them. It's good that we can put an end to them ourselves. But there's the other hand: times when the practice can seem very narrow as we're face-to-face with our own sufferings, face-to-face with our own stupidity, basically. As Ajaan Suwat used to like to say, "Ignorance is basically stupidity." Fighting off our defilements, some of which we really like, is difficult work. But it's important that we keep our work in perspective, so that the heart and mind don't become narrow.

So reflect on that passage in the chant we recited just now: "Cultivate a limitless heart." A limitless heart is expansive and doesn't see things just from a narrow perspective. It has to take a wider perspective. In other words, our individual issues are not the only issues in the world. The people around us have issues, too. And we have to have some compassion for them. At the same time, they can be very irritating people. For that we need a heart limitless not just in its compassion, but also in its endurance.

How do you develop that? Well, paradoxically it's by focusing on little things and having the right attitude toward little things.

To begin with, some things are little but you tend to see them as big—bigger than they really are. It takes some effort to see that they're actually little and minor and that your heart is much bigger.

Think of that passage in the sutta where the Buddha says to make your mind like earth. Someone can come and spit and urinate on the earth and dig around in the earth to try to make the earth not earth or to be without earth, but that person's efforts are really small and pitiful, because the earth is just so huge. "Make your mind like space." People can try to write and draw pictures on space but there's no surface on space, so the pictures have nowhere to stick. "Make your mind like the River Ganges." It's a huge river. Someone could take a torch and try to burn up the river but he'd never be able to burn away even a little bit of it. You want to make the mind that

impervious, that solid.

This is an issue of endurance. Patience. It's important to see that patience and endurance are very intimately connected with goodwill: You can maintain your goodwill because you can put up with a lot of the stuff that's out there in the world and it doesn't make you wish ill for anyone.

We don't pretend that the people around us or in the world at large are all wonderful, that they're all well-intentioned. They're not. People have all kinds of intentions, and we can't be responsible for or control their intentions. But we can be responsible for our own intentions, and we can make our mind large. We wish them goodwill not because they're good but because we want to master the power of endurance so that the things that other people do to us are not going to have that much of an impact and persuade us to do unskillful things.

So those are the types of little things that you want to keep little: the things other people do, that they say, the way they infringe on your boundaries, where they go against your idea of how things should be done. Learn to regard those actions with some compassion; learn to regard them with some endurance. Don't let little things like that blow up to become big things. Little issues that would destroy the harmony of the group: Keep them little and make your heart large so that you can endure them.

There are other little things, though, that you tend to overlook because they seem so minor, and yet you really should focus on them—because this power of endurance, this limitless heart, doesn't start at the edge of the universe and work in. It starts here and moves out.

One way of starting here is to look around you and see what needs to be done. There are lots of little things in the monastery that are not assigned as tasks. We each have our own duties, but don't think that just doing your duty is enough and then you can go back to your hut, go back to your tent, and shut out everything else. Sometimes you look around and see that something a little extra needs to be done. So you do that. Then you go back to meditate.

There's a rainstorm forecast for tonight. One of the things you should do is look around you. What needs to be put away, what needs to be fixed, in case there's rain? Or when you walk down the road and there are some weeds by the side of the road—and as a monk I can't tell you to pull out the weeds—but the weeds are there and, as they say, you can contemplate them. You don't have to wait for someone else to tell you.

Paying attention to little things like this makes life a lot easier for everybody else around. Little things you can do for people, behind their backs, the nice things: Those really make the life at the monastery a lot

more pleasant for everyone. Many of us think that the atmosphere is friendly when we sit around and chat a lot. But that doesn't make things friendly. That can actually make things unnecessarily complicated. What makes things friendly is when you find that someone's done some little nice thing for you behind your back—or has taken care of some little detail around the monastery, not necessarily for you, but you can see, "This person cares about the monastery, this person cares about the community." That's what creates harmony.

So, paradoxically, the limitless heart that we're trying to cultivate here focuses on small things of this sort: the small favors we can do for one another, the small tasks we can do—not because they're assigned but simply because we see that they need to be done and are good to do.

That opens our own perspective. I remember reading years back of a Western monk who had gone to Thailand. He was saying that originally he looked down on some of the other monks and nuns in the monastery because they'd spend a little time puttering around, taking care of this little thing, that little thing. He felt he was doing some much more important work: He was going to go straight to nibbana, he wasn't going to go puttering around. But then he found pretty quickly that his practice got dry. He realized that the other people puttering around were actually doing something useful for their own minds. They were developing good qualities. They weren't going dry. These are perfections: patience, endurance, goodwill, compassion. They all go together and they all help with the meditation.

When you focus on doing the little good things, that strengthens your mind and develops the attitude of a limitless heart. In other words, you're here not just to do an assigned job and forget about all the other things that need to be done. You don't have to fill your day with tasks. Just notice little things that need cleaning up, picking up. When you've done your job, say, at the kitchen, your job in the afternoon, look out for any detail that still needs to be taken care of. Do a couple of extra things every day. Get yourself out of yourself. And it's in doing the little things that larger qualities develop.

Ajaan Lee makes this point in one of his Dhamma talks. He commented that the Buddha was an enormous person. In his words, he said, "His eyes were enormous: They could see the entire world. His mouth was enormous: He could give a Dhamma talk that people continue to repeat thousands of years later." Then he asked, "How did the Buddha get large like that? Well, first he focused on small things." He made himself totally unimportant. He left the palace, rejected job offers from kings, made himself totally

unimportant. There's even a passage in the Canon where he says that sometimes he'd be out in the forest meditating and young boys who were herding cows came by. They would see him and, just for the fun of it, they would urinate on him. And he endured that.

In other words, by making himself unimportant he eventually made himself very important. He focused his attention entirely just on his breath. Remember Stephen Colbert's remark about Buddhism, where he asked, "You wrap yourself in a cloth, you sit under a tree, and you breathe?" Well, yeah. You get really good at something really small like this, something that no one else cares about, and then, as Ajaan Lee says, your goodness explodes and becomes a limitless heart.

So have the right attitude toward small things: both the small things that should remain small and the other small things where you realize, "Okay, by focusing on these small things I'm enlarging my heart."

That's one of the best techniques for getting yourself out of the suffering of the path, or the suffering of your own sufferings: by making your heart and mind so much larger than all the irritations inside and outside can ever be.

The Meaning of Happiness

January 9, 2014

The Pali word that we translate as happiness—*sukha*—actually has a very wide range of meanings: everything from physical pleasure, to well-being, bliss, ease, the whole gamut of all kinds of physical and mental well-being. Sometimes “happy” seems to be the right translation, and sometimes it seems a little bit air-headed.

Years back, when we were first translating the chants here, I went to a meeting where there were some nuns and monks from England. Over there, they translate the passage, *Aham sukhito homi*, as, “May I abide in well-being,” which a friend of mine called Benedictine Pali. One of the nuns was curious to hear how we translated the passage, and so I told her: “May I be happy.” She started laughing so hard she almost fell out of her chair—I guess she felt that the simple wish for happiness was kind of air-headed. So if you have that feeling around the word “happiness,” remember that *sukha* covers a lot of other things as well.

The Buddha himself said that another word for happiness is acts of merit. Merit is another one of those words we have trouble with—it sounds like merit badges and Brownie points—but what he’s saying is that happiness lies in the action of doing something good. He lists three kinds of meritorious actions: generosity, virtue, and meditation. And those three activities cover pretty much all the goodness in the world. The acts that give meaning to our lives come under these three headings.

Generosity means not only giving material things, but also giving your time, giving your energy, giving forgiveness, giving help in all kinds of ways. It’s in the act of giving that a lot of us find meaning in our lives: the time we give, the love we give to others, the care and concern. The act itself is a form of happiness, a form of *sukha*.

The same with virtue: This has more to do with refraining from things where you could harm other people or yourself, or you could do something that was for your advantage that would take something away from someone else. You may find yourself in a situation where you could do something of that sort, and maybe get away with it, yet you don’t do it. You have a sense that your worth as a person is much more important than whatever little gain you might get from behaving in lowly ways. That’s another area where

we can find a lot of meaning in our lives.

And then there's meditation. The Pali word here is *bhavana*, which means "developing"—developing good qualities in the mind. We primarily think of meditation in terms of developing mindfulness and alertness and other good qualities as we sit here and do formal meditation, but it applies to all areas where you see that your mind needs to train itself in noble qualities—in your thoughts, your words, and your deeds.

So when we say, "May I be happy; may all living beings be happy," it's not that we're hoping for everyone to sit around grinning, surrounded by nice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. Basically it means that we hope that they do good, because that's where the happiness lies.

Sometimes you run into descriptions of the Buddha's teachings on happiness that sound pretty hedonistic. A few years back I was going to give a talk on a Buddhist perspective on the pursuit of happiness. In the afternoon before the talk, I happened to meet with my old Christian Ethics professor from college. He asked me what I was going to say that night, and I decided to boil it down to one sentence, which was, "The pursuit of happiness doesn't need to be hedonistic." In other words, the wish for happiness is not simply about gathering up pleasures. He said, "I wish I had the time and opportunity to come and hear that."

Sometimes you hear mindfulness sold as a way of enjoying your pleasures more. The more mindful you are, they say, the more pleasure you find in simple physical sensations. This idea is especially common when they practice eating raisins as a mindfulness practice: You find there's a lot more flavor to the raisin when you savor it slowly. There's a lot more pleasure in the experience of drinking tea when you sip it slowly: enjoying the warmth of the cup in your hand, that kind of thing. Yet a psychology professor writing about positive psychology pointed out that, of various approaches to pleasure and happiness in life—such as mastering a skill or devoting yourself to a higher purpose—the lowest is trying to enjoy sensual pleasures. All he knew about Buddhism was the Raisin Mindfulness School. When he described Buddhism, he was trying to write about it in a respectful way, but he couldn't help but place Buddhism at the very lowest end of the various approaches to happiness in the world.

This is what happens when you try to sell Buddhism in a way that you think is going to appeal to people—teaching them that if you practice mindfulness, you can squeeze a lot more happiness out of consuming the pleasures in life. So there is that understanding about Buddhism going around out there, but it's not what the Buddha taught.

As he actually said, the happiness lies in the actions—when you do something skillful, something noble. That’s where the real happiness lies: both because there’s a sense of well-being as you do the action—you realize that what you’re doing is not harming anybody—and in the sense that it’s going to produce happiness down the line, both for yourself and for others. In this sense, the Buddha wants you to take the pursuit of happiness seriously. You would think that people would stop and think about how they’re trying to be happy, but they don’t. They just follow their urges. This may be one of the reasons that happiness has bad press in some areas, because a lot of what people do when they’re trying to be happy is to block out huge patches of reality so that they can just focus on what they like, and pretend that what they’re doing has no impact aside from the immediate sensation of pleasure.

The Buddha wants us to be very clear-sighted about our happiness—all the implications of where we look for happiness and how. If you want happiness that’s true, he said, you have to develop qualities of wisdom, compassion, and purity. These are all noble qualities in the mind. Without them, there is no true happiness. Wisdom starts by seeing that pleasure and pain, happiness and sadness, come from your actions. They’re not just a matter of things floating by. So you’ve got to be very careful about what you do and say and think, because some things lead to short-term happiness and then long-term pain. Other things might be difficult in the doing, but they lead to long-term happiness. Seeing that, and being able to talk yourself into doing those things that will lead to long-term happiness regardless of whether they’re easy or not: That’s a real function of wisdom.

As for compassion, you have to realize that if your happiness depends on other people’s suffering, it’s not going to last, it’s not going to be true happiness. So you have to take their needs into account.

As for purity, you look at your actions and see: Do they really fall in line with your values, your desire to be compassionate, your desire to be wise? You don’t go just on good intentions. The Buddha makes the distinction: There are good intentions and there are skillful intentions. With good intentions, you may mean well, but you can end up causing a lot of harm because you’re not really looking carefully at what you’re doing or the results of what you’re doing. You’re deluded.

Skillful intentions, which are free from delusion, are the ones that actually do lead to happiness. To be skillful like this, you’ve got to keep checking your actions, again and again and again, to see what results you’re actually getting, to make sure that you’re acting on your best intentions and

your best understanding of what's going to happen as a result. You also keep in mind that there are situations where you may not know, and the only way to gain knowledge is to experiment and learn from your actions, too. You've got to do your best, or at least what seems to be most skillful, and watch for the results. All of that, the Buddha identifies as the quality of purity.

So there are good, noble qualities that you can develop in the mind through the wise pursuit of happiness. And it's in developing those noble qualities that true happiness lies—true well-being, true bliss, or however else you want to translate the word *sukha*.

So as we meditate, we're here partly for the sake of the sense of ease and well-being that comes as you get the mind to settle down, but also for the sake of using that settled well-being as a tool to gain greater insight into the mind, and to strengthen our generosity, strengthen our virtue, strengthen all good qualities in the mind that need to be developed. The pleasure of the meditation is happy in the doing, but it's also a tool for an even greater happiness. And this is what gives meaning to our lives—the fact that the mind is developed.

There are a lot of things that we try to accomplish in life that depend on outside situations, projects we'd like to do, goals we'd like to realize in the outside world. Sometimes we actually do accomplish them, but then someone comes along and erases our accomplishment. Look at the tide of history: Things go back and forth and back and forth, like the tides of the sea, and if your sense of accomplishment or meaning lies in the sense that you've made a permanent change in the world, it's going to be disappointed. It'll be washed away, like sand castles when the tide turns. I remember listening to a lawyer who had argued many cases before the Supreme Court. He was talking about how, when he started out his career, things seemed to be heading toward greater and greater freedom, greater equality, and greater goodness in general, but then the tide turned, and he saw all his accomplishments being frittered away by one court case after another.

So if you're looking for meaning in those terms, the world is a pretty cruel and heartless place. But if you look in terms of the good qualities you can develop in the mind, they don't have to depend on the world outside. And the actions that you do that are skillful, that are meritorious, that are meaningful—these are things that give real meaning to life. The qualities of virtue, generosity, and all the other things that the Buddha describes as inner treasures or inner perfections: Those are what real happiness means.

Examine Your Happiness

December 28, 2014

During my years in Thailand, I was often asked why I ordained, why I was interested in Buddhism, but one time I was asked a more specific version of that question: What was it that Ajaan Fuang taught that attracted me to him particularly?

I didn't have a ready answer right away, but as I thought about it, I began to realize that there was one teaching that had really struck me when I first went to stay with him, which is that this practice is all about purifying the heart. As he said, everything else in the practice is just games. The real thing, the serious part, the earnest part of the practice, is purifying the heart. That resonated.

When we think in these terms, it helps give a sense of direction to what we're doing and helps us check what we're doing. There's a passage where the Buddha says, "You know another person's purity by the way that person has dealings with others." In other words, when you engage in a trade, are you fair? When you engage in an argument, are you fair? Do you take advantage of other peoples' weaknesses? Do you make underhanded arguments? Do you take more from others than you give, or do you give more?

You can use the same principle looking at the mind to figure out what is meant by purity of heart and mind.

How does your mind deal with itself? How do you deal with the world? Basically, how do you feed on the world? How do you look for your pleasure? How do you look for your happiness? Do you give more than you take, or do you take more than you give? When the Buddha uses the metaphor of feeding, it has a really deep meaning because you begin to realize that ultimately the only pure happiness is one where you're not feeding at all, in any way, physically or mentally. But on the way there, you're going to have to feed.

First, though, it's good to think about happiness. What is happiness? The Pali term *sukha* has a wide range of meanings. It starts with basic pleasure and ease and works up to well-being and bliss. But it's one of those terms that the Buddha never defines.

Lots of other terms he defines very precisely, but some of the really

basic terms—mind/citta, happiness/sukha, and stress/dukkha—never get defined. The teaching is basically about training the mind to end stress and find true happiness, but of these terms, only “training” is defined. In the case of happiness and stress, he gives examples but he doesn’t provide a formal definition. And I think part of the reason is that he wants you to take a close look at where you search for your happiness, and what you regard as happiness. The same with dukkha: He wants you to look at the direct experience of stress and suffering in your internal sense of your mind. Your understanding of all these terms is going to develop and grow more refined as you practice, as you look at them more carefully.

So it’s good to stop and think: What does happiness mean to you? How do you go about it? What kind of trades do you make with the world, what kind of deals do you make with the world, in order to get the happiness you want?

And what are the results? As the Buddha said, the happiness we’re looking for in the practice is one that’s not only solid, but also blameless. In other words, in your trades with the world and in the way you feed off the world, are you giving more than you take, are you taking more than you give? If you take more, there’s something blameworthy there. If there’s any harm involved in what you’re doing—either harming yourself by breaking the precepts, trying to incite yourself to passion, aversion, and delusion, or harming others by getting them to do those things—then there’s something in your happiness that’s not pure.

There’s also the issue of the effort you put into that happiness. Is it worth it? Do you really get the happiness you want from it? What’s the cost of this happiness you’re pursuing? You want to look at this balance sheet very carefully. One of the reasons we practice concentration is to gain a sense of the range of happiness, the range of well-being that the mind is capable of. For a lot of people, sitting and meditating is not easy. Almost everyone has hardships; the few people who don’t have hardships, as I’ve said many times, are like flowers that were ready for the Buddha to pick. We weren’t ready at the time, so we still have to struggle. The Buddha was often clear about the fact that skillful practices can involve both pain and pleasure, and that unskillful practices can involve both pleasure and pain. You’ve got to look past the immediate pleasure and pain to sort out which kind of happiness, in the long term, is worth pursuing.

With every effort you make, you want to examine: What’s the amount of happiness you gain as a result? Psychologists have noticed again and again—and not just psychologists, almost everyone has noticed this in other people

—that we tend to overestimate certain pleasures, the ones we like to like. We dress them up for ourselves to make us want to go back to them again and again. Yet when you actually look at the direct experience of these things, there's not much there. So the Buddha wants you to get a better sense of what happiness is, what well-being is, what bliss is.

The bliss of concentration is an acquired taste. It's a specific kind of happiness, which the Thais call *santi-sukha*, which literally means the happiness of peace. This is a basic level of well-being that we tend to overlook because it carries no excitement, no thrills. It's just a basic sense of ease that's steady, like the flame of an oil lamp. For most of us, we notice pleasure and pain because of the back-and-forth, the ups and the downs. When things are steady and on an even keel, we tend to lose interest and not notice them. But that's precisely the kind of well-being we're working on here: the kind of happiness that's steady, that doesn't go up and down. We have to learn how to appreciate that. As we stick with it more and more, we begin to realize that we wouldn't want to be without this kind of happiness, without this kind of well-being.

But then the next question is, is it really steady?

As you examine it, you find that it, too, involves a certain level of feeding. You're feeding off of the breath, the ease you can create with the breath. You're also feeding off of the steadiness of the intentions that keep you here. But over time, you get more and more sensitive to the fact that even the steadiness of concentration is not totally steady. It involves a very subtle kind of movement, back and forth—sometimes more intense, sometimes less, but there's always a slight inconstancy to it. You want to get sensitive to that, because that's what motivates you to look for something better.

But in the beginning of your concentration practice, you want to focus on the steadiness. That's what motivates you to get into the concentration to begin with and to try to stay there. We often hear the Buddha talking about how the five aggregates are stressful because they're inconstant, and as a result we're taught not to identify with them, but there are levels of the teaching where the Buddha says you don't focus on that yet. You focus instead on the fact that some aspects of form, feeling, perception, mental fabrication, and consciousness are actually pleasant, and you want to pursue them for that pleasure.

There's the pleasure of the precepts, the pleasure of generosity, both of which are conditioned things. There's the pleasure in concentration, which is also conditioned, and you want to motivate yourself to develop that and to

appreciate it, so that it can provide you with nourishment on the path. If you jump right in and say, “Well, everything is inconstant, stressful, and not-self, so let’s just go beyond the concentration and move on to the next step, not bother with working on the concentration,” that simply short-circuits the path. It starves the path. You’re gaining training in happiness, you’re gaining sensitivity in what it means to experience well-being, so that you’ll be able to recognize the ultimate well-being when it comes. Even though the path involves a kind of feeding, it’s the kind of feeding you need so that you’re not feeding on something more blameworthy, something more unskillful. This is the happiness that’s relatively pure, not absolutely pure, because there’s still a kind of feeding. Still, at this point you need to feed, so you go for what’s relatively better.

As the Buddha noticed when he was practicing, if he didn’t eat, he couldn’t practice right concentration. The body needs nourishment, the mind needs nourishment, but you need to learn to be pure in your dealings with other people; you need to try to be fair. Having this internal source of food helps you to be less grasping and needy in your dealings with others. Still, there comes a point when you realize that even the purity of concentration is only a relative kind of purity. You want to look deeper. The only absolutely pure way that you can engage with the world is if you don’t have to feed on it anymore. You don’t have to take anything.

This is why the arahants don’t store up food. A lay person who becomes an arahant has to ordain because that person just doesn’t want to store food, doesn’t want to take from the world anymore. Such a person is willing to live off what is offered day by day. The idea of going out and taking things from other beings is repugnant. Only if those beings are happy to give it do arahants want to receive.

So take a good close look at what well-being means to you. What is happiness? What is pleasure? What does ease mean to you? What does bliss mean to you? In English, we talk about blissing out, with the emphasis usually on the “out,” in that the pleasure is making you oblivious, which is the problem with that kind of bliss. But what would true bliss mean where you’re not blissing out, but just blissing—where there’s just bliss and lots of awareness, with no feeding at all? Your dealings with the world are entirely pure: What would that be like? A happiness that doesn’t involve any feeding: It’s hard for us to imagine that because all of our happiness involves feeding one way or another, and it’s good to become sensitive to that fact.

So even though a totally pure happiness may be a long way off, we can be more and more pure in our dealings with the world as we try to find

happiness, and figure out what happiness is, realizing that certain types of happiness that we've enjoyed in the past—when you really start looking at them carefully—are really not worth it. Happiness that comes from gain, status, praise: You want to be able to see through that, so that you don't go trying to grab it from the world. Instead, you want to turn inside and see what is it about the way the mind relates to itself: What are your dealings with your own mind, and to what extent are you honest with yourself about what happiness is and in what you're doing to get it? And what are the results of the way you're getting it? How do these things all balance out? It's in sensitizing yourself to these issues that you get a better and better sense of what a pure happiness would be.

So these are some of the reasons why the Buddha doesn't define terms like happiness and suffering, because all too often if you think of the term as defined, and you assume you know it—when actually you don't.

Happiness is an undefined term that's really important in our lives, and yet all too often we don't really look carefully at the experience of happiness. We don't think seriously about happiness. We just see other people going for this pleasure or that, and we think it looks like fun, so we follow them without really looking at what we're doing. The Buddha wants you to look very carefully inside yourself: What are your dealings with the world? What are your dealings inside over the issue of happiness? To what extent do you lie to others, to what extent do you lie to yourself? To what extent do you harm others, to what extent do you harm yourself in your search for happiness? Can you clean up your act?

This is something we all have to look at deeply within ourselves in order to answer properly. But the proper answer is, Yes, you can do it. You can clean up your act—if you see that it's important enough.

So try to nurture that sense of its importance. After all, we live for the sake of happiness. Everything we do is for the sake of pleasure, so let's make it a pure pleasure, a pure happiness, a pure bliss that involves no harm, no feeding at all.

Don't Underestimate Merit

November 12, 2015

We're meditating, which is a meritorious activity. Puñña is the Pali word. There's no good English translation yet. Maybe someday someone will come up with a good one. We usually translate it as "merit," and it sounds like Brownie points and merit badges. It creates an image of grasping at more happiness for yourself. And in a way it is, but we're looking for a happiness that doesn't create boundaries.

Most ways in which people look for happiness create boundaries because if happiness is dependent on having a particular relationship with a particular person or having a particular level of wealth, then when one person gains, somebody else has to lose. That kind of situation is what creates boundaries, creates divisions. As the Buddha said, it's a blameworthy happiness because it depends on taking something from somebody else.

Whereas the forms of happiness that qualify as merit—and the Buddha says that activities of merit are another name for happiness—help to erase boundaries. Generosity: You're giving something away to someone else. That creates a relationship right there, erases a boundary. When you buy or sell something, there's a boundary. The fact that money has to change hands is what creates the boundary. But when something is given, that boundary gets erased.

The same with following the precepts: You realize that your true well-being has to depend on not harming other beings. So you don't kill, you don't steal, you don't have illicit sex, you don't lie, you don't take intoxicants. At the same time, you're looking after your own welfare because you don't create the kind of kamma that will come back and bite you. Other people benefit; you benefit, too. In fact, when the Buddha talks about helping other people, it's basically getting them to observe the precepts as well. After all, they are agents and they're going to be reaping the results of their actions, so you want to encourage them to do things that will reap happiness for them.

And that moves into the meditation, which is also an activity in which you create happiness for yourself that spreads out to others. The fact that you're dealing with your greed, aversion, and delusion—trying to make them weaker, trying to make them less likely to burst out of their cages and go prowling around the neighborhood: That means that other people are going

to benefit. They don't have to be victims of your greed or your aversion or your delusion.

So it's good to remember that as we meditate here, it's not just for us. We're doing something that spreads its goodness around, spreads its happiness around, without any set boundaries.

Living as a monk makes this especially clear. Back when I was living in Thailand, it was frequent that when I was going for alms, some very, very poor people would put food in my bowl. I remember one couple in particular: There were just the two of them. They'd recently gotten married. They had a little shack just big enough for the two of them to sleep in and the rudiments of a kitchen out back. But every day, they put some food in my bowl: some rice and a piece of sausage or some dried fish. I'd get back to the monastery, eat their food, and warn myself, "Okay, today you're the beneficiary of a poor person's generosity. You can't be sloppy in your meditation. You can't be lazy. You've got to do this for them."

But even as a layperson sitting here meditating in the monastery, you're surrounded by people's generosity. The land was donated. This sala was built by people's donations. Everything inside here is a gift so that we can meditate, and then we can benefit others through our meditation. So try to keep that larger perspective in mind. Especially when you feel like you're tired in the evening and say to yourself, "Well, that's enough for tonight." You have to ask yourself, "Well, have you done a little extra for others? Is that enough?" Push yourself a little bit harder, so that you can repay your debt to others. Learn to appreciate this happiness that spreads its goodness around.

So don't look down on the concept of merit. It's very useful. It's what develops that attitude of mind where you see that your happiness is not just yours. There's no ironclad wall built around it opened just for yourself or for a select few people. You realize that to be truly happy, you can't be doing anything that is really harming anybody else. And for some people, that's a hard lesson to learn. It takes a while. So the fact that they're still learning this lesson on that level: Don't look down on it.

There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about different motivations for being generous. And the lowest one, of course, is, "I'll get this back with interest." But still that's a good motivation. It's better than saying, "I don't see any need to be generous at all." There's too much of that out there. When people begin to realize that if they really want to have wealth that lasts for a while, if they want to have well-being that lasts for a while, they've got to share: That's a meritorious motivation that should be encouraged.

As you work up the levels of motivation, you finally get to the ones where generosity is simply a natural expression of the mind. You say to yourself, “I give simply because it’s good to do this. The mind feels refreshed.” That, too, is a benefit you get from it.

So don’t look down on the idea that you’re going to get something out of this. Don’t think that it taints your merit or the goodness of your actions. It’s simply a matter of how refined you can make your sense of how you benefit from the generosity or how you benefit from the practice of virtue, how you benefit from the meditation. As your mind grows, it just gets more and more refined.

There are some Buddhist circles where people like to say, “Our meditation practice is totally pointless and we’re proud of the fact.” But that’s self-defeating. It means that they have to hide from themselves the fact that they’re benefiting from the meditation. Or if the meditation really isn’t benefiting them, they should look around for better ways to meditate.

There’s a part of the mind that always calculates: “When I do this, what are the results going to be? Is it worth the effort?” Thinking in terms of merit expands your sense of how you define “worth the effort.” If there’s something that’s going to be just short-term and just for me: Well, that’s perhaps one level of motivation. But you can think in larger terms: long-term benefits, wider benefits, long-term happiness, a blameless happiness. That expands your horizons, and it puts the practice of meditation into a different context.

Many of us come to meditation because we’ve got particular problems that cause suffering in our lives. Something’s wrong, something’s lacking, something’s eating away at our hearts. We have a sense that meditation might be able to do something for that. That’s a perfectly fine motivation for coming. And when the Buddha taught the four noble truths, suffering was the first thing he talked about.

Some people come with a particular problem that’s been eating away, but once that problem gets solved, they stop meditating. We see some of that. But there are other cases: As you take care of that particular problem, you see that there is a larger structure to the way we live our lives, the way we have bodies that age, grow ill and die. There are dangers out there, dangers in here. And the damage that those dangers can do doesn’t stop just in here. Even if it comes from in here, it can spread out. You begin to see there’s a larger issue that the practice can address.

This is where your sense of what the practice is about begins to grow. Your sense of what constitutes well-being gets more and more expansive

and refined. But there's still a sense of, "Okay, what does make this worthwhile?"

Even when discussing the motivation for putting the teachings on not-self into practice, the Buddha says that it leads to your long-term welfare and happiness. Stop and think about that: Not-self is for your happiness. Even though the practice leads beyond your "you," there's still a "you" in the motivation for doing it. And think about the Buddha's definition of discernment. It comes from the question: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" Your sense of what qualifies as long-term and your sense of what qualifies as happiness get more and more demanding as your practice progresses, as your wisdom grows.

And part of the demands they make force you to turn around to examine the other part of that question: my. What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? You begin to see that your welfare and happiness, if it's very narrowly defined, is going to be self-defeating. If it's more broadly defined, that's when it can take on energy. That's when it can take on life. That's when it becomes really worthwhile. Even though there is an element of calculation in the motivation, don't look down on it. Just learn how to calculate wisely: When is it worth the effort? Because that's the question the Buddha has you ask all the way up, even when you get to the highest levels of the practice.

Eventually, you realize that this sense of self that you've been straightening out as you meditate has carried you far, but there comes a point where it can't carry you any further. That's the point when it doesn't become worth doing anymore. Your sense of self is a kind of doing. You've had many senses of selves and many ways of doing them. As you practice, you get more and more demanding about what you want to identify with and finally you get to a point where an identity becomes an activity that's not worth it anymore. It's delivered you to the threshold to something much bigger. That's when it's not worth it, because that something bigger is so much more worthwhile.

So this question of "Is this action worth doing?" is a question you have to keep in mind all the time. And don't try to hide it from yourself, thinking that it's spiritually unadvanced. Simply allow it to mature and grow as you practice.

Ultimately it'll take you to a point where there's no more doing anymore, there's no more need. But we can't short-circuit the practice by saying, "Well, I'll just go to that point first." No, you need to refine your discernment to get there, which means you have to go through the stages of figuring out

what kinds of activity strike you as worthwhile. Put them into practice and ask yourself, “Are these the results I really want, or do I want something better?” That way you sensitize yourself to your actions, and refine your sense of what you really want out of them.

As the Buddha said, the secret to his awakening was, one, not being willing to give up his effort, and two, not being content with skillful qualities. Listen to that. Things are good but they could be better. That was the motto that kept him going. It took him all the way. Otherwise, when you’re content with whatever little concentration you have or whatever little mindfulness you have, you say, “That’s good enough,” and that brings the practice to a halt.

We have to admit where we are and accept where we are as a starting point, but we also have to accept the fact that we have greater potential and can do better. We have to learn a mature way of living with that possibility so that we can make the most of it: to spur us on for effort that really does yield results, effort that really is worth the effort, as your sense of what’s really worthwhile will continue to grow.

Dedicating Merit

September 28, 2015

There are two ways of looking at consciousness. One is from the outside. We look at other people, other beings, and their consciousness seems to be dependent on their bodies. Without their bodies, we would have no sense of their consciousness. When the body dies, their consciousness seems to disappear. In this view, the body comes first and consciousness comes after. If you want to make a change in consciousness, it has to come from a change in the body.

The other way of looking at consciousness is to look at it from the inside. In other words, you're here, conscious, and your awareness comes first. Your awareness of the body then comes after, and the world outside after that. As we try to make changes in our consciousness, we realize that although some things may come in from outside, a lot of the changes come from within.

This second point of view is the one from which the Buddha's operating. You don't solve the problems of consciousness by changing the chemicals of the body. You solve the problems by understanding consciousness from inside, what your intentions are, what your perceptions are, the questions you ask, how you can change these things. All this is consciousness changing itself from within. In this case, consciousness is prior. If it weren't, meditation wouldn't be doing anything useful at all. But it is doing something. It's changing our minds.

And as the Buddha said, at the end of life, when the body no longer provides a place for the consciousness to stay focused, it can go on. Craving is its bridge to another body. And of course, craving depends on consciousness. Consciousness depends on craving. The two of them, as long as they keep supporting each other, can go on indefinitely. And the currents of consciousness can go outside the body. They can do things that a normal materialist wouldn't imagine.

This is one of the things you learn as you practice. There's more to the mind than just looking at it from the outside would tell you.

Several years back I gave a Dhamma talk at a mediation center. I talked about kamma, and during the Q&A got into issues of rebirth. The following week, the teacher at the center decided he had to do damage control. So he

explained that poor Than Geoff went to Thailand when he was young and impressionable, and picked up a lot of things over there. He didn't sort out the differences between true Dhamma and Thai culture, and so he mixes rebirth up with the Dhamma.

Actually, I've always felt the fact that I was in Thailand from an early age was not a handicap at all. It was being there when I was still receptive—and being around the ajaans and other people practicing meditation—that I began to realize that there's more to the mind than Western materialistic ideas can account for. And one of the things about the mind is the notion of the current of the mind. The mind is constantly sending out currents. When the mind is really concentrated, those currents can be focused and strong. If you send currents out to other people, and if those people are sensitive, they can pick them up.

One evening when I was meditating, I happened to think about one of the supporters of the temple. She was going through a bad time, so I sent some metta in her direction. The next day, she came to the monastery and said, "Did you send metta to me last night?" She had felt it, and she knew where it came from. So these aspects of consciousness: At the very least, leave your mind open to their being possible. One of those possibilities is that, because consciousness doesn't end with the death of the body, you can effectively send the current of your goodwill to people who have passed away.

A brahman once went to the Buddha and asked him about the brahmanical tradition of making merit for dead ancestors. His question was, "Do the dead ancestors receive the merit?" And the Buddha said, "If they're in a position where it's possible for them to receive it, they will." And that possible position was the realm of the hungry ghosts. Now this can be seen as something of an insult to the brahmans. They called their ancestors *peta*, which originally meant "father," and now when the Buddha talked about *petas*, he was portraying them as hungry ghosts: beings that, after they died, wander around, hungry, with very little source of food aside from the merit dedicated to them.

The brahman then asked, "Well, what if I don't have any ancestors who are hungry ghosts?" And the Buddha replied, "Everyone has ancestors who are hungry ghosts."

So think about that. When you're meditating here, you're making merit and you can share it. The act of sharing is a meritorious act in and of itself. You might say that it gives you compound interest on top of the good you've done. And the question, of course, is: Given the teaching on *kamma*, how

can your merit go to somebody else? The answer is that they have to appreciate it. That appreciation is a meritorious act on their part. They have to be in a position where they can receive it and then feel some appreciation for the goodness you've sent in their direction. That becomes their good kamma. The hungry ghosts tend to be sensitive to this, which is why they're in a position where they can receive this.

When I first met Ajaan Fuang, it was shortly after my mother had passed away, and the dedication of merit was one of the first things he taught me. "Every night, after your meditation," he said, "dedicate the merit of your meditation to your mother." Of course, then it expands out. They talk a lot about making merit and then dedicating it to the people to whom you have karmic debts: people who have been good to you, people who deserve your gratitude. It's a good exercise to sit down and make a list: Who are the people who've taught you things? Who are the people who've gone out of their way for you? Teachers, friends, relatives, or non-relatives: Dedicate your merit to all of them. Doing this expands your mind and it sends good currents out to others. Whether or not you can follow the currents and check on the recipients, it's always a good attitude to say to yourself, "I'm just going to spread it out, regardless." After all, there are some hungry ghosts who are receptive, and others who are not.

I've told you the story of Maha Khwan. He was a monk at Wat Makut who was very deeply into the Buddha-image business. People would come from different parts of Thailand with Buddha images, or parts of Buddha images: heads, hands, or whatnot. And they would come around 2, 3, 4 a.m. No questions were asked as to where they got these things. If it was a head, no question was asked, "Did you cut off the head yourself?" Maha Khwan had money in his drawer. People could take the money, and then he had arrangements that—I don't know exactly how many intermediaries there were—eventually got these Buddha images and parts of Buddha images onto the international art market. So who knows? When you go to a house here in America with a Buddha head or hand on the coffee table, it may have gone through Maha Khwan.

At any rate, he was off in an isolated part of the monastery. There were no other monks living nearby—and he liked it that way. When Ajaan Fuang was invited to go to Wat Makut to teach meditation, the abbot arranged for him to live in the second story of a building where Maha Khwan was living in the first story. Even though the two stories had separate entrances, Maha Khwan didn't like having anyone else there, especially with Ajaan Fuang being a meditation monk. Who knows? He might be up meditating at 2, 3, 4 a.m. He might see something going on. So Maha Khwan did everything he

could to get rid of Ajaan Fuang.

Ajaan Fuang stayed on for three years and then was invited out to Wat Dhammasathit. Shortly after he left Wat Makut, Maha Khwan was found stabbed to death, and then nobody would live in the building after his death, for fear of the ghost.

A couple of years later, Ajaan Fuang was invited back to Wat Makut to teach meditation, and found himself back in the second story of the same building. As he was teaching meditation, every now and then one of his students would report a vision: “There’s this bloody monk wandering around the building.” They had no idea who it was. They hadn’t heard the story about Maha Khwan. Ajaan Fuang would always say, “Well, dedicate the merit of your meditation to him.” So they’d sit for a few minutes, and in every case, the answer would always come back, “He won’t accept it!” Some grudges get carried past the grave.

So it’s not the case that all hungry ghosts are receptive. But given that we all have dead relatives or dead friends who are probably hungry ghosts, it’s good to dedicate our merit to them. There’s always the possibility that it could give them the nourishment they need.

There are other stories about hungry ghosts that I reported in *Awareness Itself*. Ajaan Fuang had a student who suddenly found herself seeing a lot of hungry ghosts in her meditation. I think there was a Dhamma inspiration for this, because she herself prior to that had been practicing magic. She insisted it was white magic, but you never know. And people who’ve practiced magic tend to believe that the doctrine of kamma doesn’t apply to them. So all of a sudden, as she was meditating, she saw all these people who were suffering from having done bad kamma in one way or another. It was a good lesson in kamma for her. When she first started seeing these things, she didn’t want it to happen. She asked Ajaan Fuang how she could become insensitive to these things. But his reply was, “There are good lessons for you to learn, and also good things you can do for them.”

So he told her, “Whenever you see a hungry ghost, first ask it what it did to put itself in that position. Then dedicate the merit of your meditation to them, in case they might be in a position to receive it and benefit from it.” So she found that, as she would ask these questions, they were quite honest in saying, “I did this, I did that.” But she also found that, after she had dedicated the merit of her meditation to them, some of them would actually change from their status as a hungry ghost to something much better—but others would not. They weren’t yet ready.

This is why, as I said this afternoon, there’s no expiry date on how long

you can dedicate merit to somebody after they've died. There doesn't come a point where they can't receive it anymore. In some cases, their kamma doesn't allow them to pick up on a dedication of merit for a while. If they're in a position where their kamma allows it, when they're sensitive to it, and they're appreciative, then the merit does go to them—because they make merit in their act of appreciation.

So remember that the ways of consciousness are a lot subtler—and contain a lot more possibilities—than our normal Western upbringing would allow for. It's also helpful to remember that we're here in a large fabric of interconnected people: people we've depended on, people we've benefitted from, and now we're in a position to benefit them in return. The attitude that's willing to benefit others is an important nourishment for your own concentration.

This is why dedicating merit is good for you, too. It broadens your mind, makes you more appreciative of the goodness that you've received from others, and of the possibility to pass that goodness on. And it gives further motivation to put more effort into the practice. Sometimes you may say, "Well, that's enough for me tonight," but then you can ask yourself, "Is this enough for all the people I'd like to help?" Push things a little further so that you have enough goodness—not only for yourself, but also enough to pass around.

Harmlessness

September 25, 2015

When the Buddha defines right resolve, he defines it in three terms: resolve for renunciation, resolve for non-ill will, and resolve for harmlessness. The first one is obviously different from the other two. And the question often comes up, “How are the other two different from each other?” If you have ill will for someone, it’s very close to wanting to see them harmed, wanting to do them harm. And there actually is a close relationship, but there is a distinction.

Ill will is the opposite of goodwill. Harmfulness is the opposite of compassion. Goodwill is a general wish for happiness, for your own happiness and for others. Compassion is what you feel when you have goodwill for someone else but you see that they’re suffering or they’re acting on the causes that would lead to suffering. This can apply to yourself as well as to other people.

So it follows that ill will is a general desire to see someone suffer or to do things that will cause suffering. Harmfulness is more specific: You see somebody’s down and you want to harm them. In other words, they’re suffering, they’re poor, they’re in a position of weakness, and you want to take advantage of that weakness. That’s what harmfulness is.

So when we resolve on harmlessness, we don’t pile on other people—and we don’t pile on ourselves. Sometimes when we’re feeling weak in the practice, part of the mind will jump on us and say, “That’s a sign that you should give up.” This doesn’t necessarily mean giving up entirely but just, say, giving up for tonight. You can start telling yourself all kinds of stories about how the meditation’s not going well. You sit down. Your mind is all over the place and you tell yourself, “Gee, I shouldn’t be meditating. My mind’s a mess.” That’s harmfulness right there, that thought. And as Ajaan Lee once said, “If you can do harm to your own goodness, it’s very easy to let it spread out and you start thinking about doing harm to other people’s goodness, too.”

It’s interesting that when the Buddha talks about benefiting others and harming them, it’s not a question so much of what you do to them. It’s what you get them to do that’s going to make the difference between benefit and harm. If you get people to observe the precepts, that’s for their benefit. If

you try to dissuade them from practicing, if you try to tell them that the precepts don't have to be held to all the time, or there are times when it's justified to kill or to lie or whatever, that's doing harm to those people. You've found them in a position of doubt or weakness, and you take advantage of that.

So when we work on right resolve, we start first by learning how to appreciate our own desire for happiness and doing what we can not to harm that desire. We learn how to encourage ourselves, how to give ourselves the morale we need in order to practice. Being resolved on harmlessness for other people means that you try to encourage them, too, whenever it's appropriate. Now, there are a lot of times that people will not want to take your advice, in which case Ajaan Lee would say that if you continue to try giving them advice, it's a form of idle chatter. But if you can see that either through advice or through example you can be a good influence on others, you're carrying out right resolve.

The whole function of right resolve is to remind yourself that simply knowing about the four noble truths, knowing about the teachings on kamma, is not enough. These are types of knowledge that demand action. They point out possibilities and they also point out dangers—in other words, the possibilities for the good things that come from training your mind and developing your goodness, along with the dangers of not developing your goodness.

Right resolve acts on that knowledge, realizing that it's meant to be a guide for action. Sometimes you develop goodwill for yourself and encourage yourself to practice, especially when you're down. This is when harmlessness comes in. You don't jump on the weakness or the discouragement or the times when you have an off night to pull yourself further away from the path.

Even when you have other responsibilities that don't allow you to be practicing all the time, you don't use them as an excuse not to practice. You try to find the little cracks in the time of the day, the openings where you can get the mind to settle down at least for a short spell of time. Give yourself meditation breaks here and there, and you find that once you've taken a break like that and then you anticipate the next one, there's a possibility that you can make a link between the two—to be with the breath all the time, continuously, as your grounding.

I received a phone call this evening from someone who asked, "How do I stick with the breath throughout the day? Do I just not care about other people? Do I not take in what they're saying?" I said, "No, that's not the case

at all.” When you’re with the breath, you’re giving yourself a solid place to stand as you take on your other responsibilities. And you’re actually more able to be sensitive to other people when the basis of your attention is your breath, rather than what it normally is: your moods, your preoccupations.

So you look for whatever opportunity there is to practice. There’s a common phrase that you try to bring your practice into your life. Actually, it should be the other way around. You try to bring your life into the practice. In other words, the practice is the container. Your awareness of the breath should be the container for the day.

And even when you can’t focus entirely on the breath, or give it your 100% attention, you can still make it the framework. Even though you’re aware of what’s going on outside and you’re responding to what’s going on outside, you can still be aware of the breath energy in the body. It may be too much to ask of yourself to be conscious of “in and out” in the breath, but you can be attuned to simply the general quality of the breath energy. That’s something you can sense immediately and deal with immediately, especially if you’ve been working in your formal meditation on how to breathe through tension in the body, breathe through blockages in the body, expand your awareness, expand the sense of the breath throughout the body. As you get better and better at that skill, it doesn’t take all that much to bring it into the rest of your life. And if you do it well, you find that, yes, it is a grounding. It does provide you with a good foundation.

That way, your breath is the container for the rest of your life, as it should be. After all, without the breath, you wouldn’t be dealing with anything at all, doing anything at all, having any contact with the outside world at all. You’d be dead. So spread your awareness around—a larger awareness, a larger sense of what you can do. And this is how you have goodwill for yourself. This is how you have compassion for yourself: You hold yourself to a higher standard, realizing that you have these potentials. If you deny the potentials, if you put them down, you’re treating yourself in a harmful way.

So an important part of the path is learning how to keep yourself encouraged, to give yourself the morale to stick with the path, to stick with the practice even when it gets difficult, even when you seem to be backsliding in terms of the results. Make sure at least that the causes don’t backslide, because, after all, the mind is a complex phenomenon.

There’s not just one mind in there. There are many minds with lots of different agendas, lots of different attitudes. Sometimes you can deal with one mind and everything seems to calm down. But tomorrow another comes

up. It's not that you've been defeated by the first one. It's just that another one has come moving in. It's like a large organization—a big bureaucracy or a big corporation—and everybody's firing emails at one another all the time. You can take care of some of the unskillful emails from some quarters and that seems to calm things down, but then tomorrow, another faction will come up with theirs. Well, don't be surprised. Don't get discouraged. It's going to take a while to clean out the whole corporate culture inside here.

So when you think about the principles of non-ill will and harmlessness, remember that you should be the beneficiary of them, along with other people. You don't want to harm yourself. Again, keep that point from Ajaan Lee in mind: If you harm your own goodness, it's very easy to harm other people. So maintain your goodness. Regard it as your most precious possession. The Buddha talks about protecting your goodwill as a mother would protect her only child. Well, try to protect all your goodness in the same way, because it's all you've got.

The Samsaric Mud Fight

December 27, 2014

The question came up yesterday about the difference between Mahayana and Theravada. And one of the important differences is how they view samsara. For the Mahayana, samsara is a place. And because it's a place, if someone does a lot of good, develops a lot of good qualities, and then leaves that place, that person is leaving everybody else in a lurch—which is why they say that the truly generous and compassionate person wants to hang around, doesn't want to leave samsara. In fact, they define samsara as being identical with nibbana if, they say, you look at it the right way. That way the bodhisattva gets to be in samsara and nibbana at the same time.

But the early teachings don't treat samsara as a place. They treat it as a process.

Samsara literally means “the wandering-on.” It's an activity. A process. And you don't just wander. You create the worlds that you wander into. They involve feeding, and that's addictive.

So samsara is basically a bad habit, where you have an idea: You'd like to have this kind of pleasure, but no matter what it is, it's going to cost a certain amount of suffering both for yourself and for other people in the worlds you create around that desire. This is why stopping the process, stopping the addictive habit, is actually good for yourself and for those others. And this is why samsara and nibbana can't be the same thing, because samsara is an addiction, and you can't stop the addiction—the stopping is nibbana—while still indulging in it.

Stopping your own addiction is good for others for two reasons. On the one hand, you're giving a good example. On the other hand, you're taking one more person out of this addictive process, one more person out of the feeding chain. So the idea that you would want to wait until everybody else got over their addiction before you're willing to give up your addiction doesn't make any sense.

We could view samsara as a big mud fight. I splash mud on you. You splash mud on me. And then I splash mud on you back because you splashed mud on me. It goes back and forth like this and it never ends. So the idea of trying to straighten everybody out—or trying to settle the score—

again makes no sense.

There's that famous story of Somdet Toh. A junior monk came to see him once, complaining that another monk had hit him over the head for no reason at all. He hadn't done anything to harm the other monk. The other monk was just a really bad guy who came up and hit him. And Somdet Toh said, "Well, you hit him first." The junior monk replied, "No, no, he came up and hit me first. I didn't do anything to him at all." Somdet Toh kept insisting, "No, you hit him first." And so the young monk went to complain to Somdet Toh's superior, who must've been the supreme patriarch. He went to Somdet Toh to question him about this: "Why did you keep insisting that the innocent monk had hit the other monk first?" And Somdet Toh said "Well, it's kamma. If this monk had never hit that other monk, maybe in some other lifetime, he wouldn't have been hit back."

The idea of settling scores makes sense if you have a clear beginning point and a clear endpoint. But when the beginning point, as the Buddha said, cannot be found, can't even be conceived, how are you going to figure out what the score is? Where would you begin the tally?

This is a useful point to think about when old wrongs come up in your meditation. You start thinking about events in your past: people who abused you, people who did horrible things to you, or people who are still doing horrible things to you now. You have to ask yourself, "Well maybe I've done something to that person." That doesn't exonerate the other person. It simply means that the two of you have been entangled in this mud fight, back and forth, and you don't know when it began. So the best thing is to say, "Okay, I'm just going to not continue the back and forth." Wish the other person well. If reconciliation is possible, try for reconciliation. If it's not, you go for forgiveness, because you realize that not every score is going to get settled, but you can pull out of the mud fight even when it seems like the other person is winning unfairly. In any mud fight, the question of who splashed more mud on the other person after a while becomes really irrelevant. It's not the kind of score you want to keep, a score you want to settle. It's a fight you want to get out of.

There's a passage where the chief of the asuras says, "If other people see you being restrained while they abuse you, they'll think you're weak, and that might make them abuse you even more." And Sakka, the deva king, replies, "No. You can't look after the other person's behavior. You have to look after your own." The only way this back and forth can stop is if you stop. See that their words and actions don't really touch you—at least they don't touch your goodness. Then it's as if somebody throws something dirty

at you and it falls at your feet. Well, just leave it there. Don't pick it up and throw it back, for otherwise the dirt will now be on your hand.

One of the skills we need to develop as we meditate is to learn how to see these things as not hitting us. They just go right past, right past. The words go past. Even if the other person hits your body, the body's not you. That's one of the good uses of the not-self strategy. It's just a body. You have an awareness that's separate from that, that's not besmirched by that. The only thing that can besmirch your awareness is what you do.

So when things like this come up in your meditation, you realize, "Okay, this has been a back-and-forth that it's best to get out of." It's a process. Remember, we're not here in a place where we're trying to establish a just or paradisiacal society, or even a fair society. We're entangled in a bad process, and the wisest, most compassionate thing is to get out and to show other people that they can get out, too. You have to realize that you're not the only person who's been involved in this kind of behavior. Everybody has been involved in a back and forth to some extent—if not precisely the way you've been involved, they've got their own involvements.

It's up to you to decide. You have the freedom to decide. If you want to fight for other people to help get them out of this kind of situation, make that your gift to humanity: That's your choice. It can be a form of generosity. But you have to realize that people have their choices, too. They can choose to follow along with your idea of what's good or they can choose not to.

The Buddha never said that we're here to clean up the mud fight. We're here to get out of the mud fight. And your idea of how things should be: That's what a lot of the mud fights are all about—how to redress old wrongs. When you've had enough of the mud, there comes a point when you have to realize that the Buddha was right. The best course of action is to get out—for the two reasons I mentioned. One is that you're no longer oppressing the other person, so you're no longer creating bad kamma for yourself. And two, you can set a good example for other people.

Now, they have the right to choose to be inspired by your example or not. You can't control that. But what you can control is the kind of example you set. So you have the choice. Are you going to be the sort of person whose life is totally ruined by something that someone else did or is continuing to do? Or are you going to learn how to step outside, step to the side, and say, "Okay, those things happened. Who knows when it started, but I don't have to be directly involved anymore. I don't have to keep identifying with the fight, identifying with my role in the fight, identifying with my avatar that I've designed here." And then you drop the whole thing.

Now some mud may continue to come back at you for a while, rebounding from your old kamma, but there comes a point where it ends. In the meantime, you've created one more stellar example. It's like black holes, which are surrounded by dazzling light. Things leaving the rest of the universe and going into the black hole release enormous amounts of light. In the same way, in creating a good example, you create a lot of light for the world. And that's actually a gift: Getting out of the process is a gift. We're involved in this addictive process. And the best way you can put an end to it is to end your addiction. Then, if you have the time and the energy and the talent, you help give information to other people on how they can do the same. That's how compassion really works, both for yourself and for the world around you.

Justice vs. Skillfulness

July 31, 2016

When we develop the brahma-viharas—attitudes of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity—we try to make them unlimited. In other words, we develop goodwill for all beings, compassion for all, empathetic joy for all, and we have to learn how to apply thoughts of equanimity to all when necessary.

The problem is that although our attitudes may be unlimited, our resources for actually helping people and improving the world are not. This is why we need a clear set of priorities as to what we can do, what we can't do, what things are worth doing, worth improving, what things are not—because if you spread yourself too thin, you end up not accomplishing much at all. Or, if you focus on solving the wrong problems, you end up regretting it later.

For example, sometimes we're told that the Buddha's main purpose in teaching was to put an end to all suffering. Well, yes, but his approach to accomplishing that end was very specific. Instead of running around trying to right all the sufferings caused by the injustices of the world or the structure of society, he focused on one type of suffering: the suffering we each cause ourselves, through our own craving, through our own clinging, through our own ignorance. When we put an end to that suffering, we don't suffer from anything outside at all. But the problem has to be solved from within, which is why he never said that the whole world, or half the world, or whatever, would put an end to suffering. He simply taught the way. It's up to each of us to follow it. And none of us can follow it for anyone else.

As for the suffering that comes from the three characteristics, that's something that can't be stopped. Those characteristics are still going to keep on manifesting themselves in the world. The question is: Do you have to suffer from them, does your mind have to suffer from them? And the answer is No.

So the focus is specifically on how the way you engage with the world is causing suffering through your engagement, through clinging and craving and ignorance. That's what we work on as we meditate.

As for helping other people, that's a matter of generosity. The Buddha set out duties only in terms of the four noble truths. As for the issue of

helping other people, he didn't place a duty on anyone. He pointed out the advantages of being generous, but he didn't try to force anyone in that direction. He simply pointed out that certain things are skillful and certain things are unskillful in your engagement with other people, and it's up to you to choose what you want to do—realizing the consequences that will come from your choices.

And it's important to note that the main emphasis is on what's skillful and not. This is indicated in the set of questions that the Buddha says lies at the beginning of discernment: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What is skillful? What is blameless?" Those are the questions on the positive side. Then on the negative side: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy?"

Notice the terms of the questions. There's never a question, "What is justice?" The question is, "What is skillful?" When you look at the world around you, you see a lot of injustices. You see a lot of mistreatment of people and animals. But are we going to deal with it primarily as an issue of injustice, or as an instance of unskillful actions?

Our idea of justice is based on the idea that there's a beginning point to a story. From that point, you figure out who did what first, and then who did what second, and then at the end of the story you tally up how things should be apportioned in terms of guilt or lack of guilt, based on which actions were justified by what went before and which ones weren't, so as to bring things into a proper balance.

But in the Buddha's vision of time, there's no beginning. As he said, you could trace back, back and back and back, and not find a conceivable beginning. The beginning point, he said, is inconceivable. Not just unknowable, inconceivable. You can't even think it. We've been through the ups and downs of time so many times, through so many universes, that, as he said, it's hard to meet someone who hasn't been your mother or your father or your brother or your sister or your son or your daughter in all that time. The stories are very long.

So if you're going to start apportioning blame and trying to bring things into balance, where do you start?

There's a famous story concerning Somdet Toh. A young monk once came to him to complain that another monk had hit him, and Somdet Toh said, "Well, you hit him first." The monk replied, "No, no, he just came up and hit me over the head and I hadn't done anything at all."

Somdet Toh said, "No, you hit him first."

They went back and forth like this for a while, and then the young monk got upset and went to see another senior monk to complain about Somdet Toh. So the other senior monk came and asked Somdet Toh what was up, and Somdet Toh replied, “Well, obviously it’s his kamma from some previous lifetime. He had hit the other monk first at some point in time.”

And, of course, that might have been after the other monk had hit the first monk first—so it goes back and forth, back and forth like this.

So when you see mistreatment around you, the first question isn’t, “Is this just or unjust?” The question is, “Is the person dishing out the mistreatment behaving in a skillful way or unskillful way, and what can I do, behaving skillfully, to put a stop to unskillful behavior?”

Now there’s some unskillful behavior you can stop, and other unskillful behavior that you can’t. The kinds you can’t stop are the cases where someone’s kamma—your own or the other’s—gets in the way. But the basic question is this: When is it skillful to interfere, when is it skillful to get involved, and what kind of interference would be skillful? What would be a wise way to be generous, virtuous, or to show goodwill? In other words, what would be a skillful way to alleviate the problem through acts of merit? Sometimes the answer is clear and sometimes it’s not. If you have the energy and the wherewithal and it’s not too dangerous, you try to help. Then, if you see that it’s not working, you pull back.

But a lot of this also has to do with your priorities. There are some unskillful things happening in the world that really are worth banding together with other people, getting your energies together, and seeing if you can put a stop to them. But you have to do it in a skillful way. There’s never a case in the Dhamma where good ends justify unskillful means. The means have to be good—in fact, everything is all means. After all, where would you put the ends? You settle one issue and there’s another issue. You settle that issue, then everyone dies, they get reborn, and things start up again. We don’t have the closure of a final judgment.

The only real closure in the Buddha’s teachings is nibbana, and that’s a closure that each of us has to find within ourselves. We’re not going to find closure out in the world, because the nature of the world is that everything falls apart—even the best things—and then gets reconfigured again and again, around and around and around. Even at the beginning of each cycle in the universe, there’s not just one beginning. The Buddha has several ways of describing how the universe starts to evolve. There’s no one person behind the evolution, no one plan behind the evolution. There are just lots of individuals with lots of plans, and they’re driven mainly by craving and

ignorance. That's what keeps the whole thing going.

As long as you're trying to straighten things out outside, your attempts are dealing in craving and ignorance. Sometimes it's other people's craving and ignorance; sometimes it's yours. Your ideas of a just resolution, their ideas of a just resolution, contain a lot of ignorance. In fact, most of the problems of the world come when people's ideas of justice conflict. One side tries to impose its ideas of justice on another side, which has its own different ideas of justice, and they can believe so strongly in their ideas of justice that they're willing to kill to get them imposed. This is where a lot of fanaticism comes from. So you have to be very careful around this issue.

This is why we work on the mind, because only in the mind can closure come. Meanwhile, outside, the main question is not an issue of justice or injustice. The issue is, is this particular action I'm contemplating doing skillful or unskillful?

The Buddha never tries to justify, say, oppression by saying that the oppressed people deserved it. The word "deserve" also doesn't appear in the Buddha's teachings, aside from the statement that arahants are deserving of offerings. In fact, that's what "arahant" means: deserving.

Until we reach that point, there are simply skillful actions with good results and unskillful actions with bad results, and we all have a big mix of both. So when you see somebody suffering, you don't know which part of that person's mix is showing, and how much good stuff, say, is not showing. The part that's not showing is what gives the potential for you to help them.

In other cases, it's clear that you can't help. Like the squirrel I saw yesterday: Something was obviously wrong with one of its legs—or maybe two of its legs—but the closer I got to it to see what was wrong, the more it tried to struggle and struggle to get away from me. I realized that my concern was causing it a lot of suffering. So I had to back off.

That's the kind of situation where you obviously can't help. But other situations are not quite so easy to see. The important thing is to remember the categories. It's not about ends. It's about means. It's not about just or unjust ends. It's about skillful or unskillful means. That way, we can live with one another—and with ourselves.

When there's unskillful behavior outside, at the very least you don't condone it. You don't encourage people to engage in killing or stealing or lying, no matter how you glorify the ends to which that behavior could lead in the short term. And if you can think up some skillful way to stop unskillful behavior, you try. But your primary responsibility is what you're genuinely responsible for, i.e., your own choices, what you do and what you

choose to tell other people to do. Make sure that those choices are skillful.

If everybody looked after this one issue, the world would settle down. Our problem is we're trying to straighten everybody else out by imposing our ideas of justice without straightening ourselves out first.

This is why we have to develop equanimity in addition to goodwill, because there are cases where, because of karmic obstacles, past or present, we can't help. After all, for people to be happy, they have to create the causes for happiness. You can help them by encouraging them to be skillful, but the choice of whether or not to follow your advice and example is theirs.

As for the unclear cases where you're not sure whether you can help, you have to keep your priorities straight. What are the most important things for you to do? Where do you want to focus your energies to make a difference in the world? In other words, where do you want to choose to be generous?

As the Buddha said, with generosity there are no shoulds, there's no imposition. He simply recommended that you give where you feel inspired, where you feel the gift would be well-used. That applies not only to material gifts but also to gifts of your time, gifts of your energy to improve things in the world. It's up to you to decide where you want to make your mark, who you want to help, realizing that once you've chosen that, there are other things you're going to have to put aside. If your energies get too scattered, the Thai phrase is that you take a container of pepper sauce and pour it into the sea. There's so much water in the sea that the pepper sauce makes no difference at all.

This is why we have to practice equanimity. We have goodwill for all but we have to realize that we can be helpful only in certain circumstances, and we have to be very careful about when our efforts at help are skillful and when they're not.

Make sure that those are the terms of your analysis. Once you keep that point straight in your mind, then it clears up a lot of other difficulties.

Now, our society doesn't think in these ways. Most people think in the terms of a story with a beginning and an end, where it's clear to them who's right and who's wrong. We argue over the details, especially about what's relevant to the story and what's not—that's why there's so much conflict—but everybody seems to have the idea that there's a beginning point and an end point and a plan to all this—and that there's somebody up there who's got an idea about a just way to arrange things, and assigns us duties.

But that's not in the Buddha's universe at all. There's no clear end, no clear beginning, and "There's no one in charge." As that passage also says,

the world is swept away. Just make sure you don't get swept away with it. Try to be clear about what you're doing, clear about doing it skillfully. That's how you come to closure. That's how you get out.

This is what the practice is all about: getting out. We try to leave some good things behind as we get out—in fact you can't get out without leaving some good things behind, in terms of your generosity, virtue, and goodwill—but sometimes the best gift you can give to other people is simply to show them that there is a way out that they can follow, too.

Try to keep that way open as much as you can through being skillful in your thoughts and your words and your deeds. Look at the Buddha: He gave the greatest gift of all. He gave us the Dhamma, showed us the path, and then he left. Now it's up to us to give that gift to ourselves and to the people around us as best we can.

Inner Refuge Through Inner Strength

June 11, 2016

When we were in Brazil, someone asked why sitting along with a guided meditation got much better results than sitting there meditating on your own—even in a group, in the presence of the teacher. My answer was basically that the person giving the guided meditation is doing a lot of your work for you. In other words, the instructions are doing what your mindfulness should be doing. That's why although it may be useful to have a couple of guided meditations every now and then, there comes a point where you have to do the work yourself. Nobody else can make you mindful. No one can make you awakened. Someone once asked the Buddha, "Please remove my doubts." And the Buddha said, "I can't remove anybody's doubts. You have to remove your own doubts." So we've got the instructions, and it's up to you to remember the instructions and to carry them out.

You focus on the breath, try to stay with the breath as much as you can. If you need a meditation word to help, use *buddho*, which means "awake"; or you can just do in and out—anything that helps you stay with the breath. Then, when you can stay with the breath, you can drop the meditation word. And the more continually you can stay with the breath, the more you begin to notice where the breath is rough or uneven or too long or too short. You can make adjustments. Try to make your attention on the breath steady and constant, and that will help smooth out the breath. As for whether long breathing feels good or short breathing feels better, that's up to you to decide. You develop not only your mindfulness—i.e., your ability to keep things in mind—but also your powers of judgment as to what's working, what's not working, how to compare. The more you meditate, the more you have to depend on your own powers—of judgment, persistence, discernment. And this is what the meditation is for, to teach you how to depend on yourself—how to become your own refuge.

We talk about how we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—both on the internal and external levels. On the external level, you're inspired by the story of the Buddha; inspired by his teachings; inspired by the Dhamma; and inspired by the example of the noble Sangha. We take these people as examples for how we should live. As I was saying today in class: Try to live your life in such a way that if people read about your life, they would be inspired. Not that you're showing off, but just keep

that in mind, that you're setting an example for others, too, as you act. You see the good example that the Buddha has set, the good teachings he has given us, the good example of the noble Sangha, and one way of expressing gratitude for that is to try to pass on that example. But more important than that is for our own sake, for our own strength—we want to take them as examples so that we can depend on ourselves. As for other people, whether they take you as an example or not, that doesn't lie within your power. There's no way you can force them. And even if they don't take you as an example, your practice is not wasted, because you have taken care of your own true responsibility.

Now, the question is: How do you take the example of the Triple Gem and turn it into a refuge inside?

That's what the teachings on the five strengths are about: five steps by which you internalize the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and make them your own refuge. All five steps build on heedfulness. You realize that if you can't depend on yourself, you're living in a dangerous world, because even your act of taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha becomes uncertain. Some days you take them as examples; other days you live as if they never existed. Sometimes the change is not from day to day. It can even be from moment to moment. This is scary. So you've got work to do. There are dangers here inside the mind, and there are dangers outside. But the dangers inside the mind are important ones. Keep that thought as your motivation and then, based on that, develop the five strengths.

The first is conviction—conviction in the Buddha's awakening, the three knowledges he gained on the night of his awakening, and most importantly the knowledge he gained about kamma: that actions have results, and that the results depend on the intentions inspiring the action and the skill with which you carry it out. And you really do have the choice—you have the choice to change the way you're acting. You've got to have that conviction, that you have it within you: If you see that you're doing something unskillful, you can figure out how to change. It's a possibility, which means that you're also convinced that you've got it within you to carry it through.

If you don't have that conviction in yourself in addition to the conviction in the Buddha, the practice is not going to work. You run up against an obstacle and you just run away. As Ajaan Lee said, it's like digging down into the ground to find the gold there, but first you run into a big rock. Some people, when they hit the rock, just throw away their shovels and run off. But if you're convinced that the gold is there and you can find it, you'll be

able to find some way of getting through the rock or around it.

Years back when we were getting ready to build the chedi at Wat Dhammasathit, we had to bring in some people to put some dynamite in the rock in the mountain. They had no fancy equipment, just a spike and a hammer—that was it. They would tap, tap, tap lightly on the rock, and then turn the spike a bit, and then tap, tap, tap. And I kept thinking to myself, “These people will never get anywhere into the rock.” But, sure enough I came back two hours later and they had gotten a couple of feet into the rock. Just tap, tap, tap—it was the consistency of their effort that got them through the rock—along with their conviction. They had seen in the past that it had worked, so they just kept at it.

So you’re going to need that kind of conviction. It may seem that not much is changing from day to day, but over time, you get deeper and deeper through the rock, until finally there is gold on the other side. So conviction is what gives you a sense that your own actions are important, and if you have any unskillful qualities, you have the ability to change that.

Building on that conviction is persistence: the effort to develop what’s skillful and abandon what’s not. But it’s more than just effort. As the Buddha said, an important part of right effort is generating desire—your motivation. You have to keep reminding yourself why you want to do this. You’re not doing this because somebody else tells you. You’re nobody’s servant. This is your own choice. And you choose it not because you can’t do anything else, but because it’s inherently good.

That was another one of the questions that came up in Brazil. I was asked, “So why did you ordain? What went wrong in your life?” And all the monks laughed. As I answered, it was something that went very right—I found a path that I could really give my whole heart to. And so whatever motivation keeps you on the path, try to develop that.

Goodwill is an important one; goodwill is a strength that you can generate from within. It’s your protection—it can protect you from yourself and it can often protect you from other people. If you’re radiating goodwill, people feel less threatened by you. At the same time, you’re less of a threat to yourself. You’re much less likely to do harmful things. You want to remind yourself, “Okay, I want to act in a way that harms nobody.” And it is possible—and it warms your heart. That gives you energy for the practice.

You can motivate yourself with heedfulness; you can motivate yourself with a sense of pride that you don’t want to stoop to anything low, that you want to do something noble with your life. That’s a perfectly legitimate motivation. There is also a sense of shame that comes with that pride—that

you would be ashamed to even think about doing something beneath you. So you let it go.

This means that persistence is not just chipping away, chipping away. It's also giving yourself the juice you need to keep going: that you're doing it because it's good and you want to do it.

And then, building on this persistence, you develop the other three strengths, beginning with mindfulness: the ability to keep something in mind. In this case, you keep in mind all the instructions you've received—and the lessons you've learned from your own practice—that are helpful for whatever particular step of the practice you're doing at that point.

For instance, as you're sitting here meditating, you don't have to think about generosity or virtue too much, except when you find that it gives you strength. Your sole concern right now is to remember that you want to be with the breath. And you keep reminding yourself that you want to stay here.

Together with mindfulness, there's alertness: You watch to make sure that you really are doing this. This is a strength because it keeps you from wandering off and losing your focus. And as you focus in on the breath, you find that your steady focus does change the quality of the breath along with the quality of your experience of the body. If it's skillful, it gives rise to a greater sense of well-being. This is how mindfulness begins to shade into the next strength, which is concentration.

You stay consistently focused with the breath. To define concentration, the Buddha uses the word *ekaggata*, which can be translated as being one-pointed, but also can mean having one gathering place. In other places, he describes concentration as whole body awareness, so it's more likely that in this case it means that everything in the mind is gathered around one topic—the sense of the body, the sense of the breath as you breathe in and out, and a sense of the more subtle levels of breath energy that course through the body. You learn to develop a sense of well-being, a sense of refreshment with the breath that fills the whole body.

This refreshment, when you gain it, really helps with your conviction and your persistence. It's not the case that, as you develop these strengths, you develop one and then drop it and then go on to the next, or that only the first one helps the second one, which helps the third one. They all help one another. Concentration, in particular, helps with your conviction, your persistence, and your mindfulness. As the Buddha says, mindfulness doesn't become pure until the fourth *jhana*, which is a fairly advanced stage in concentration.

So as you're focusing here on the breath, once there is a sense of ease, think of that ease spreading through different parts of the body. In the beginning, it may not go everywhere, but allow it to flow wherever it can flow easily. And in the same way that allowing water into a channel widens the channel as more and more water goes through, you find that the more the breath runs through the body, the breath energy channels widen and grow more inclusive, spreading more and more to the body as a whole.

As you're doing this form of evaluation, you develop the final strength, which is discernment—you see what's working, what's not working. It's not just on the basis of what you've heard, it's on the basis of what you're actually doing. As you learn to adjust things, you begin to see which ways of breathing are more pleasurable, which ways of breathing help you stay with the breath more easily, which ways of focusing the mind and where you focus the mind have the best impact.

As you see that connection between cause and effect, that's the beginning of discernment. Then you take that insight and start applying it to other areas where you're causing suffering. You begin to have a place where you can stand here in the concentration, so that you can step back from the other ways of your mind and observe them more objectively: "This particular habit is not useful. I've got to change. Other people seem to be doing better here. Can I watch their example without feeling jealous or lessened by the fact that they are more skillful than I am?"

As Ajaan Lee said, his attitude when going to a new place was to look to see what they were doing well that he hadn't done well yet and to learn from them. But if there was some area where he knew more than they did, he would be happy to share his knowledge. But the first point is really important, especially when you're on the path. You want to see: "What do other people do more skillfully than me? Can I learn from their example?" And as you develop your other strengths, you feel confident that you can.

So it's through these five strengths that you turn yourself into your own refuge. You take the example of the Buddha and it becomes the example for your own life. So instead of having to depend on someone from outside, you've got the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha inside, where it really counts. Then as you make yourself a refuge like this, you find that you can be an external refuge to others. That's how the gift of refuge gets passed on.

Living Honorably

April 24, 2015

As someone once said, one of the most amazing things about human beings is that they know they're going to die and yet they act as if they don't know. In fact, they try to push that awareness out of their minds—because for most people, it's too depressing a thought. They don't know how to handle it, so they push it away. One of the marks of wisdom is that you don't push it away. You try to figure out how to live in the presence of the possibility of death.

The Canon has two very striking images in this regard. One is the image that came to the Buddha when he was still a young prince. He saw life as a dwindling stream. The water's running out and the fish are just flopping around, struggling with one another, pushing one another out of the way to get to that last little bit of water. And then, of course, they're all going to die. The water's going to run out. So all that fighting is for nothing.

It's like the time I saw spawning salmon in a little stream up in British Columbia a couple of years ago. The water was only an inch or two deep, and the salmon were struggling up, up, up, up the stream—fighting one another for the water, first trying to get past the seagulls at the beach who were waiting to poke their eyes out, then making it into the woods where they had to flip themselves over dead salmon to get to that last little bit of water. In the meantime, there were bears in the woods just waiting to scoop them up.

It's not a very inspiring sight. In fact, that was the image that gave the Buddha a sense of *samvega*—it could be translated as terror, dismay at being trapped in all this suffering and wanting to see a way out.

That's one image.

The other image is the one that comes from a story concerning King Pasenadi. King Pasenadi comes to see the Buddha in the middle of the day, and the Buddha asks him, "Where are you coming from in the middle of the day?" And the king, in a remarkable display of frankness, says, "Oh, I've been with my ministers engaging in the sorts of things that people who are obsessed with power, drunk with their power, do from day to day." And the Buddha asks him, "Suppose someone reliable were to come to you from the east, saying that there was an enormous mountain moving in from the east,

crushing all living beings in its path. Another reliable person comes from the south and reports that there's a mountain moving in from the south. Another person comes from the west: There's a mountain moving in from the west, crushing all living beings; and another mountain coming from the north—together four mountains moving in." He then asks, "Considering that human life is so precious and hard to obtain, what would you do?"

The king replies, "What else could I do but calm my mind and practice the Dhamma?" And then the Buddha says, "Okay, I announce to you that aging, illness, death, and separation are moving in, crushing living beings in their path. What are you going to do?" The king says, "What else? Calm my mind and practice the Dhamma."

The second image is by far the more honorable one. The fact of death is there in both images, but in the first one, everybody is still struggling for that last little bit that's not going to do them any good. And in the second, people are doing good things that they can take with them after they die—qualities of mind—behaving honorably in the face of death.

That's what we want to do as we practice. You look in the newspapers and it seems like everything in the world is falling apart. And it is. So, what is there to accomplish? We train our minds. We're good to one another, because that kind of goodness isn't erased by death. As the Buddha said, the beginning of wisdom is when you find someone who's knowledgeable and ask that person, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" That's the question.

That question is, in the Buddha's terms, an expression of appropriate attention. He has an interesting analysis of attention. He's not talking about bare attention—just sitting there, passively watching things arise and pass away, as if you're in a drugged state. To pay attention to life means to ask questions. Appropriate attention is when you start asking the right questions. And this is a good one to begin with: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" "Long-term" here is important. You want long-term rather than short-term happiness. That's part of the wisdom. The other part is that happiness depends on your actions—what you do, what you say, what you think. From that principle, you can derive a lot of the Buddha's teachings.

He talks about three perceptions, or what are often called the three characteristics. Yet the Buddha teaches them as perceptions. They're perceptions for testing things: to gauge if something you're focusing on is really worth taking as a goal, if it's really an answer to the question of discernment.

The first test is that if it's not constant, it's not going to be trustworthy. It's not going to be long-term.

Is it stressful? If it's stressful, it's not going to be happiness.

And if it's stressful and not happiness, why would you want to claim it as "mine"? That's anatta, not-self.

But you could also apply the Buddha's underlying question to other parts of the teachings, such as the four noble truths. Stress and suffering are the problem, and you've got to do something to find a long-term solution. The Buddha's first recommendations are to comprehend suffering and abandon its cause. So how are you going to figure out a way to sit with the suffering long enough to comprehend it and detect the cause? The cause for the suffering that's weighing your mind down is coming from within. That's the really important point. We tend to blame people outside for our suffering. And while it is true that they can provide plenty of material with which we can make ourselves suffer, the actual putting together of the suffering and causing it: That comes from something inside the mind itself. To see that—to comprehend that suffering and to abandon the cause—you've got to develop strength.

This is why we're meditating, to gain the strength of mind that comes from mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. These are the things that give you the strength to deal with these problems. As long as the mindfulness and concentration are not yet strong, you need other forms of strength, such as conviction and persistence. You're convinced that this has got to be the way out, this has got to be the way to behave, and this is the noble way to look for happiness. You have to ask yourself: "Are you going to go like the king or are you going to go like the fish?" If you look inside, you're not fighting with others over the water. You're looking inside for the cause of the problem—and you find that you've got the means for the solution inside as well, so that you don't have to keep on coming back again and again and again to worlds where the water is running out and mountains are moving in.

This path does offer a way out. In the meantime, you're not harming anybody and you're providing yourself with definite wealth, definite strength, definite treasures—as we often say in Thailand—that last beyond death. In other words, you treat the world around you in full knowledge that it's going to die, but you treat the quality of your mind as something that doesn't die. That's what gives honor to what you're doing. It's what makes this a noble path.

So pay attention. Ask the right questions of yourself. Where is the cause

of the suffering here? Look for it inside. This is not meant to blame you for the suffering. I mean, everybody's doing it. And it's not to say that there aren't other people out there who are misbehaving. They really are, sometimes in horrible ways. But the question is, do you have to make yourself suffer over that? Do you want to? The Buddha's offering you a skill for how not to suffer. You look for the cause inside. You develop the strengths inside. The potential is there within all of us. We can develop these strengths.

When the Buddha talked about the qualities that led to his awakening, one was resoluteness. He made up his mind that this was something he really wanted to do. Another was ardency. Another was heedfulness. He didn't have a monopoly on those qualities. When he started out, he was pretty much like us, with strengths and weaknesses. He took his human qualities, though, and he strengthened them. He found strength by being with good people; getting good advice. But then he realized that he had to do the work himself. This is true for all of us. We want to be able to depend on the people around us, yet we can depend on them only up to a certain extent. Beyond that, it's our work.

But it's good work to do. This is a path that's noble not only in the end. It's noble all the way through. All the qualities the Buddha has you develop are good qualities. There's nothing sneaky about the path; nothing cut-rate. It's a solid, dependable path. It's a safe path, even though ultimate safety doesn't come until the end. Still, the fact that we're doing things that are not harming ourselves and not harming other people: There's a safety in that.

So remember, we have the choice as to how we're going to face the fact of death. Are we going to go out like fish? Or are we going to go out like kings? Or are we going to go out like the Buddha? The Buddha shows you how to go out like a Buddha—maybe not a full Buddha, but at least someone who has the purity of mind that the Buddha developed, along with the wisdom and the compassion. The choice is just laid there before us. So take advantage of your freedom to choose.

So Little Time

September 17, 2015

We have so little time. As the Buddha said, even if you have a long life, it's a hundred years, which may seem long, but as you're approaching the end, you look back and it's nothing. Time eats everything as it eats itself. We're encouraged to have unlimited mind-states, unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, but our resources are limited—our time, our energy—which means that we have to choose our issues very carefully.

Notice that after the Buddha's awakening the issue that he focused on was one that all of us have in common, which is that we want happiness and yet our actions lead to suffering. And unlike some teachers who try to make us embarrassed about our desire for happiness or denounce it as selfish, he said that there's nothing wrong with the desire for happiness, it's just that we go about it the wrong way. He also said that if you can focus on this issue and clear up this issue, you take care of everything else.

So we have to look at the issues we carry into the practice—old wounds, old battles, old issues: How many of them are worth carrying or continuing to carry? How many issues can we take on and actually handle properly? We hear about people who find that they only have a few months left to live and they suddenly change their way of living. They get a sense of what's important to them and what's not, and they let the unimportant things fall aside. It's good that they do this, but it's a shame that they had to wait until the last three months.

As the Buddha said, you should be prepared to go at any time, which means you have to really pare down your issues right now. I was reading a while back about a woman general in the army who every day at the beginning of the day would make a list of the ten most important things that had to be done that day, in order of importance. Then she would strike out the last eight and focus on the first two. The Buddha would have you focus on one: What's the cause of your suffering right now? Where is your suffering?

This is not a selfish issue to focus on, because if you can't handle your own suffering, it tends to spill out onto other people. So we owe it both to ourselves and to others to focus on what we're doing that's unskillful and

have some goodwill for ourselves to see that our desire for happiness is something to be honored, something to be aspired to. But we want to make it a genuine happiness, a solid happiness, a reliable happiness, a harmless happiness. In other words, we really wish ourselves well.

We get practice with the breath. The other day, we were talking about having an issue with being friends with your breath. If you can't be friends with your breath, how are you going to be friends with anybody? You have to stop and ask yourself, "What's the problem? Is the breath the problem or is it something else inside?" A lot of us come from other traditions where we're taught to think very little of ourselves and we either accept that or react in the opposite direction. But neither of those attitudes is helpful. Simply wish yourself well.

As for the question of whether you or anyone else deserves to be happy, the Buddha never talked about "deserving." He was here to put an end to suffering, whether "deserved" or not. That's pretty radical. You know the story about Angulimala who had killed 999 people and then, not long after the Buddha taught him, became an arahant. A lot of people like that story. It shows that no matter what your background, there's hope.

But we have to remember that, at the time, there were a lot of people who didn't like what had happened and were pretty upset. Here was Angulimala who had killed all these people and he was literally getting away with murder. You could say that he deserved to suffer, but the Buddha didn't take that into consideration at all. He said, "Here's a person who's suffering really badly and his suffering is spilling out and affecting other people." By curing Angulimala's suffering, or showing him how to cure his suffering, he saved a lot of other people, too. So if there's the question of whether you deserve to be happy or not, you learn how to put that aside. Realize that that's a non-issue.

The issue is that you've got actions. The mind is an active principle. This is something Ajaan Mun talked about a lot. As he said, the mind flows out. There's the source of the mind, like the source of a river. Things keep flowing out, flowing out. And that's the problem. It's not that things outside are coming in to cause problems. The problem is in the way we flow out toward things. And it's not going to stop unless we learn how to do it really skillfully. Our actions are really, really important.

There was a teaching current in the time of the Buddha to the effect that the only real things in the world are the basic elements: earth, water, wind, fire. They had a few other elements as well, but the elements were the only things that existed. Actions were non-existent. Thoughts were non-existent.

This also meant that there was no basis for precepts. As they said, when a knife went through somebody's neck, it just went between the atoms, so there was nobody there to be killed, and the movement of the knife was unreal. Only permanent things were real.

The Buddha's teachings are the other way around. Your actions are what are real, that have the most reality. The world out there is not the issue. The world that you experience comes from your actions. Your actions are more solid, more powerful than your experience of earth, wind, water, fire, and all the other elements. That's a pretty radical statement. This is why the Buddha keeps focusing back on what you're doing right now because what you're doing right now is the big shaping force in your experience.

And all of us—regardless of our past, regardless of what other people have told us—have the perfect right to learn how to act skillfully, to find happiness. So learn to see the issue of genuine happiness as the big issue. Learn to see the issue of genuine suffering as the big issue, too. They go together. And have some goodwill for your own happiness.

It's interesting that when the Buddha talks about people who are wealthy but extremely miserly and frugal, he doesn't say that it's really good that they've learned how to put aside sensual desires. He said there's something really wrong with them. If they can't learn how to appreciate some pleasures for themselves, how are they going to appreciate other people's having pleasure? They're going to be jealous. They're going to be resentful. So he does encourage sensory pleasure in moderation. He says there are pleasures that are perfectly harmless for the mind.

You have to look at your own mind, though, to figure out which ones are harmless for you and which ones are not, because it's not the same for everyone. And then you realize that even though harmless pleasures give some relief to the mind, they don't leave it fully satisfied. What would be a higher level of pleasure? The word *sukha* runs everywhere from just plain old physical pleasure, ease, well-being, all the way up to bliss. *Nibbana* is the ultimate *sukha*.

The Buddha doesn't want you to be afraid of pleasure. He says to learn how to appreciate which pleasures are actually helpful for you on the path to the ultimate pleasure, and which ones get in the way. The same with pains: Some pains are helpful for you on the path. You want to learn how to use both pleasure and pain, and not be overcome by either. But the purpose of all this is to create in the mind a state of genuine well-being in concentration.

When you have that well-being, what misery is there to slosh out on

other people? For most of us, we're miserable and we slosh our misery out on others, thinking that we're lightening our load, but it just makes things worse. Well, you can take care of the source of this sloshing stuff inside. You benefit. The people around you benefit.

When the Buddha taught the four noble truths, they weren't just four interesting facts about an interesting problem. He said that this is the big issue, the fact that you're causing yourself suffering but you have the ability to learn how not to. So, given the little time that we have, it's important that we focus our energy on solving the problem that's the big problem, the problem that, once it's solved, gets everything else solved. Look at your attitude toward happiness, look at your attitude toward suffering, and see if you can bring those attitudes in line.

The Dhamma that the Buddha taught is for the purpose of putting an end to suffering and for finding true happiness: These are the issues that are important. Anything that gets in the way of those issues, you can put aside. We read about those people in the time of the Buddha who came to him with this questionnaire: Is the world eternal? Is the world not eternal? Is it finite? Is it infinite? Is the soul the same thing as the body? Is it different? What happens to awakened people after death? Do they exist, not exist, both, neither? And to us the questionnaire looks very bizarre. Yet we tend to have our own issues and sometimes they're even stranger than that. There was the monk who said he wouldn't practice the Buddha's teachings unless the Buddha gave his answer to those questions. The Buddha said, "Well, you're going to die before you hear me answer those questions."

We all know the story about the arrow. The man is shot by the arrow and he tells the doctor, "I'm not going to take the arrow out until I've found out who made the arrow, what wood it was made out of, what kind of feathers it was made with, and what was the caste of the person who shot me." The man would die before he learned the answers to those questions. We see other people's issues as ridiculous in that way. We have to learn to see a lot of our own issues as ridiculous in that way, too—the issues that are getting in the way of our gaining the most from the fact that we've been exposed to the Buddha's teachings and we have the chance to practice them, at least for now.

The Positive Side of Heedfulness

December 25, 2015

If you could boil the practice down to one word, the word would be heedfulness, appamada. As the Buddha said, all skillful qualities have their foundation in heedfulness. They're rooted in heedfulness. And even the Buddha's last words were to obtain completion through heedfulness. When we hear the word—appamada could also be translated as being uncomplacent—we tend to think of its negative side: a warning that there are dangers out there and in here, in the mind, and you've got to be really careful. If you make a misstep, you could get yourself into really deep trouble. That's one side of heedfulness.

But heedfulness also has a more positive side as well. After all, the Buddha's pointing to the fact that your actions do make a difference and they can make a very positive difference. There's that reflection about the heedful monks who think of death with every in-and-out breath, not to be afraid of death or to get morbid, but to remind themselves, "I could do a lot with this one breath I may have left. Or in the time it takes to chew this mouthful of food, I could do a lot in the practice."

This attitude focuses your attention on the positive things that can be done with the little amount of time you might have. And this doesn't have to be just the little amount of time before death. It can also be the little amount of time you have where you've stopped at a stop light, taken a small break at work, when you're waiting in a doctor's office, when you're waiting for the meditation session to begin. It seems like just a little bit of time, but often, with little bits of time like that, we tend to kill them. "Well, there's nothing much I can do now, so I might as well just relax for a bit," or whatever. But actually there's a lot that can be done in little bits of time.

Insights can come very suddenly and unexpectedly. So try to create the conditions for them, even if you have small amounts of time. Don't underestimate what you could do. In Thai, when they took over the word for heedlessness, pamada, from Pali, they turned it into pramaat, which developed its own meaning in Thai. Pamada means heedless. Pramaat means to underestimate someone or something, but it has the same double meaning, negative and positive, as heedfulness. On the one hand, don't underestimate your enemies or the dangers you face inside, but also, on the

other hand, don't underestimate yourself. You've got potentials that you can develop and you can do a lot of good with your potentials. This applies not only as you're sitting here meditating, using your ingenuity and your powers of observation to get to know the breath and to figure out what you can do with the breath energy, but also when you use those same qualities as you go through the day.

All too often we think of the practice as simply what we do when we're sitting with our eyes closed. But practice is practice everywhere. You've got the same mind, the same qualities of mind, that you want to develop, simply in different circumstances. When you're at work, you have opportunities to develop all the perfections. That's practice as well. You can focus on developing powers of patience and endurance, or you can focus on your discernment—because work does require discernment. We had a question today about whether creativity was in line with the Dhamma as you work. Well, it's an exercise of your discernment. Again, all too often, we think of discernment as simply observing things as they're happening. But you don't observe things, really, by just watching them. You have to get involved with them. You have to create good things out of them—as we're doing with the mind right now.

If you want to observe the mind, you have to put it into a state of concentration. You don't just sit here watching it as it's doing willy-nilly whatever it's going to do. You have to direct it to an object. Bring it to oneness—ekaggata. Ekaggata is sometimes translated as one-pointedness: eka, one; agga, point, -ta, -ness. But the word agga in there can also mean “gathering place,” which seems to be a more appropriate translation. Give the mind one gathering place where all of its activities can focus, and use all its sensitivities to figure out what will get it into a place where it really likes to be. Where would you really like to gather right now? And once you've gathered there, what's good about it and what's not so good about it? If it's not good, what can you change? Use your sensitivity. Use your ingenuity. Change the breath. Change the way you focus. Change the way you adjust the breath.

There are lots of different ways of adjusting the breath. Sometimes you put a little pressure on the breath. Other times you just pose an image in the mind and see how the breath responds. Then you pose another image to see how the breath responds then. Then for the fun of it, reverse the images to see if that's any better. For instance, after imagining the breath going out to the hands as it comes in, think of it coming into the hands and going up your arms.

This is called using your ingenuity. You encounter things you don't like in the meditation? Okay, how do you work your way around them? How do you live with them? You've got a pain in some part of the body? Work around it. You don't focus directly on it. As you work with this issue, you begin to realize that the extent to which a pain has an impact on the mind has an awful lot to do with how you engage with it. It's not just a brute fact that has nothing to do with your own involvement.

There are potentials coming in from your past kamma, but you've also got your present kamma. Make the most of that fact, so that even when you encounter situations you don't like—whether in the meditation, your work, your family life, or your responsibilities around the monastery—see what you can do not to suffer around them.

When I was with Ajaan Fuang, it always seemed that his bouts of psoriasis came at really inconvenient times. Not that I ever wanted him to have a bout, but it sometimes seemed that it was the worst timing in the world in terms of other projects I had to do around the monastery. So whatever else I was doing at the time, I just had to drop it. And then I began to realize that the timing that I thought was bad timing was simply getting in the way of my desires for what I wanted to do. So I had to figure out what was making me miserable around that and learn how to drop it. When you learn to do this, you can live with a lot of situations that you couldn't stand otherwise. As Ajaan Fuang himself would often say, "What do you mean, you can't do this? Is it going to kill you to do it?" Well, No. "Then you can do it."

You have to be up for whatever presents itself. This, too, is a development of the qualities you need in the practice—your powers of patience and endurance, your powers of equanimity. And learn to think of these things as powers or strengths. Equanimity is not just a weak indifference. It's being okay with whatever comes up and ready to deal with whatever problems come up as they arise, even when they're coming at really bad times and going against what you would much rather do. But it's a strength to have equanimity.

So look at all the perfections that you could be developing in different ways throughout the day. These are your opportunities. For example, with this one breath here, what's the opportunity right now? Well, you're meditating formally, where you can give the breath your full attention. Work at that. Make the most of what you've got. Make the most of this breath and then this breath. Really give your full attention to each breath. As for other moments when you're not sitting here with your eyes closed? Make

the most of them, too. Realize that a lot of good can be done each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out.

Look for those opportunities. That's also what it means to be heedful. You're not just looking for dangers. You're looking for opportunities. Sometimes the opportunities are really challenging, but you want to be up for the challenge. That's the positive side of heedfulness.

So don't underestimate yourself. Don't underestimate the dangers out there, but also don't underestimate the possibilities in here. The opportunities are out there and in here as well.

A lot of good can be done in the world. A lot can be done inside. We don't have much time. Even when people have had a long life, a hundred years, at the end of the life, it's not that they have all hundred years present right there. All the hundred years have gone, gone, gone and there's just this moment, this moment. It all seems so small at that point. Realize that you've got this moment right now. It's an opportunity right now. Don't be heedless of the opportunities, because little moments can open up large areas inside the mind, large areas of goodness inside the mind, large areas of goodness in the world. Keep looking for those potentials.

A True Person

September 28, 2014

There's a term in the Pali, sappurisa, that can be translated in a lot of different ways: a person of integrity, a mature person. Literally, it means a true person. The Buddha often pairs it with a noble person. It's the kind of person you want to associate with, the kind of person whose habits you want to pick up, the kind of person you want to become. As he said, this sort of person has seven qualities.

The first is one you can learn from books: dhammaññuta, having a sense of what the Dhamma is. Back in the time of the Buddha, of course, when there were no Dhamma books, you had to learn the Dhamma from someone who'd memorized the Dhamma—which meant that you had to have respect for that sort of person, because nobody's going to teach you anything if you don't show respect. The attitude of respect helps you make the most of just being around the person. It makes you more open to that person's influences: the person's ways of thinking, ways of dealing with other people. The more open you are, the more you pick up whatever good things there are in that person's behavior. So back in the time of the Buddha, even that first quality of a true person—knowing the Dhamma—was something you had to pick up by being with a person.

Nowadays, of course, there are books and Dhamma talks out on the Internet, so it's pretty easy to learn what the Dhamma is. But then you come to the next quality, which is knowing the meaning of the Dhamma —atthaññuta—you come to realize more and more that you don't really know the meaning of the Dhamma until you've been with a person who embodies the Dhamma. Look at all the Buddhist scholars who've read books for years and years, and know all the languages. They can come up with pretty crazy interpretations.

One recently came up with the idea that the brahma-viharas are an alternative path, a complete path to awakening: All you have to do is just sit there and think thoughts of goodwill, and that should take you all the way to nibbana. This was from a scholar who'd studied Buddhism for many years, but who was more interested in reading between the lines than in taking seriously what the lines had to say: that the brahma-viharas, on their own, don't lead to the dispassion required for nibbana.

So just being with the books doesn't mean you're going to understand them. But if you live with someone who embodies the teaching, embodies the practice, you get a sense of, "Oh, this is what's meant by this quality; this is what's meant by that quality." It's an intuitive sense that you pick up by being around a person who embodies it.

So what are some of the things you want to look for? Begin with the next quality, *mattaññuta*: gaining a sense of what's enough—enough conversation, enough food, enough sleep. You see the other person—and it's not just a matter of seeing the other person. You listen to the person's ways of working things out for him- or herself. The right amount of food and sleep for one person may not be the right amount for you. Or the right amount for you this week may not be the right amount for you next week. So you want to get a sense of how that person reads things in him- or herself, so that you can read them in yourself.

As the Buddha said, there are times when you can indulge in sensual pleasures of certain sorts and they don't have any impact on your practice. They don't pull you back, so they're perfectly okay. As he said, he doesn't criticize pleasure that is in accord with the Dhamma. But if you find, when indulging in sensual pleasures—though they may seem innocent enough—that over time you're beginning to get lazy and heedless, you've got to realize, "Put those pleasures aside. I'll have to practice with some pain."

For the Buddha, practicing with pain meant both physical pain and the practice of contemplating the foulness of the body, which is an unpleasant topic. It's not one that's easy to keep at. But there are times when you've got to do it. Otherwise, your mind's going to go running wild with its desire for pleasure. So you have to learn a sense of what's right for you at a particular time. You have to learn how to read your own behavior. And you can develop a sense of this by being around someone who's learned to read his own behavior. It's an intuitive sort of thing.

This fits in with the next quality, *attaññutta*, which means knowing yourself: where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are, what you've got to work on. If you know you have a tendency toward extreme behavior, you've got to calm it down. If you know you have a tendency to lie to yourself—you've lied to yourself in the past—you've got to be extra on-top of things. Wherever you know your weaknesses, learn how to compensate. And living with a good person helps with this, because you get a sense of where balance is, and how to recognize a weakness as a weakness.

Kalaññutta: knowing the right time and place for things, when to speak, when not to speak. Staying with Ajaan Fuang, I knew that he had some

pretty sharp opinions. But he didn't talk about them all the time. There were times when I was waiting for him to give somebody a good blast, and he didn't. There were other times when it came out of left field: I didn't expect it at all. So I had to learn how to notice, "Okay, what would make him make a critical remark, or be very frank about something at some times? And other times, why would he not be so open with his opinions?" This was just one of many things that had to do with the right time and the right place. There was also the issue of the times to be familiar with him, as opposed to the times when he was going to be distant.

It took a while to learn how to read these things. But then I found it was very useful: I learned how to read other people a lot better, too. I found that my dealings with senior monks in Thailand in general got a lot smoother because I had that experience with Ajaan Fuang. When he was sharp with me when I tried to be too familiar, it was only at the right time. Having a sense of time and place: This is a really important part of the practice. It's not something that can be taught in books, but you can pick it up by being around good people.

This connects with the next quality, which is having a sense of how to behave toward different groups of people. In India, of course, there were very clear social divisions. There were brahmans, there were noble warriors, there were householders, and people of the lower caste. Each caste had a particular way of behavior that was appropriate for it. Ajaan Lee makes a lot of this point. He says that when the Buddha was with old people, he would make himself old—in other words, he'd think about the kinds of things they were thinking about, talk in terms of their language. When he was with younger people, he would adjust his language and his manner to be right with younger people. And even though we don't have castes in our modern society, we do have lots of different groups of people with whom you have to learn how to speak and behave in the right way. Especially as monks, we want to learn how not to be offensive.

Think about the story of Sariputta's encounter with Ven. Assaji. Assaji's manners were what impressed Sariputta. They made him want to learn from him, to ask him questions. Can you make your manners like that? You want to learn the proper manners for dealing with different people of different sorts, where something that's too familiar with one sort of person might be too formal for another, or vice versa. If you've got a good teacher—I can't say that I'm 100% skilled in this particular area, but I'm learning—these are important skills to master. We tend to forget that there's a social dimension to the practice. All the time we think of the practice as sitting here with our eyes closed, or doing walking meditation. But there is the practice of how to

get along with one another. You have to learn how to get along with all kinds of people. In my life as a monk I've met lots of people from different social strata that I never would've met otherwise: both on the high end of the scale and on the lower end. But you have to learn how not to think of them as higher or lower, simply, "This person requires this kind of behavior." You want to speak to their hearts. You don't want your manners to get in the way.

Finally, there's a sense of how to judge people. All too often we hear that as Buddhists we should try not to judge anybody, but you have to judge who you can take as a good example. The sutta on the qualities of a true person says that people who are willing to listen to the Dhamma are a good example. The people who pay careful attention, who try to think the Dhamma through: They're a good example. The people who put it into practice: They're a good example. So you look for people whose behavior is exemplary. They pull you up and make you a better person because you want to be like them.

All of these things are qualities that are named in a book, but you can't learn them from a book. You have to be sensitive to what's going on inside you, what's going on outside you, because this kind of sensitivity helps you read subtle things in your own mind as well. You learn to be observant, you learn to have a sense of the right time and the right place, and how much is enough in the area of the practice: how much is the right amount of time to sit and meditate, how much is the right amount to walk, how much pain should you sit with so that you can learn from it, when you're ready for that kind of pain; how much pleasure can you indulge in without its being detrimental to your practice.

These are all important questions you have to learn how to ask yourself. So try to be observant of good people so that you can get a sensitivity to what would be a good answer.

If you want to be a true person, a mature person, these are the qualities you want to work on. They permeate everything in the practice.

Adult Dhamma

March 5, 2015

I was reading a review of a short-story collection recently, in which the reviewer was noting that although the author wasn't experimental in the way she structured her stories, she was revolutionary or radical in that she treated her characters like adults, and her readers like adults. Unfortunately, that's pretty rare.

The same observation applies to the different religions of the world.

The Buddha is one of the few religious leaders who actually treated his followers like adults. There's very little in his teachings to baby you, to please your defilements, or to pander to your desires. They point to the fact that there is a really important problem in life and that, if we train ourselves to be responsible, we are capable of solving it. That problem, of course, is the suffering that the mind creates. And the solution is a skill. It requires a lot. You have to sort out a lot of things inside yourself and shed a lot of your childish expectations.

So the question is, do you want to be an adult? If you do, this is what you have to do. Look at yourself very carefully. Sort things out inside. Accept the fact that there is a right path and a wrong path, and you're responsible for making the right choice.

This point was driven home for me recently by something else I was reading. A modern Dhamma teacher was talking about how important it is to have a sense of flexibility on the spiritual path, saying that there are many, many different ways of getting to the goal, there's no one right way, and none of the ways, he said, are actually wrong. So you have to learn how to adjust and play with your practice.

Now, even though it is true that there's an element of play in the practice, it's not true that there are lots and lots of right paths up to the top of the mountain. If you've ever been on a mountain, you've probably noticed that some paths go to the top, some go other places, some lead you over the edge of a cliff.

It's the same with the rivers in the world: They don't all flow into the ocean. Some of them flow into the Great Basin, some into Lake Eyre in the middle of Australia. They just disappear into the sand.

Two things were especially disturbing about this particular teacher's

observation that all paths are correct and that we have to be mature enough and have a broad enough vision to embrace them all. The first was his saying that the path is basically a matter of learning to embrace our sufferings together with our pleasures in the world, to realize that you can't have the pleasures without the sufferings—which is pretty much saying that there is no real end to suffering.

The other disturbing point was that he illustrated his principle with a story about a high school basketball coach who'd been hired to coach a team of specially handicapped kids. Originally, the coach had had all kinds of plans for how he was going to whip the kids into shape in spite of their handicaps. But in the first day's session, he realized that he was going to have to scrap his plans. It took him 45 minutes just to get the kids to line up on one side of the room, facing in the same direction. This made him come to the conclusion that they were not there to win; they were there to have a good time. So he fostered an environment in which they did have a good time. Everybody got hot dogs; everybody got prizes; you could stop the game at any time to dance. You could push the score button any time you felt like it. There was one game in which one kid really got into pushing the score button, and they ended up with a million points.

On the surface it's a nice story. But when you think about it a bit, it's pretty disturbing. This is spiritual practice? Throwing out the rules, giving prizes to everybody? To say nothing as to whether the coach's treatment of the kids was really the most skillful thing he could do for them, there's still the question of what the Dhamma teacher was saying about the basic spiritual problem when he used this story as a parable for spiritual practice, and how he viewed his students.

If suffering weren't a real problem, and there weren't a real solution to it, then maybe the compassionate thing would be not to place burdens on people, not to set high standards for them, not to try to force them to develop any skills that required work. Or even to tell them that they should or could develop any particular skills. But the thing is, suffering really is a problem. It really squeezes the heart, and keeps on squeezing.

That, in fact, was Ajaan Maha Boowa's definition of stress: whatever puts a squeeze on the heart. It forces its demands on you. So if there's a path to put an end to those demands, to free the heart from that squeeze and those demands, then regardless of what it requires or how stringent it might be or how much effort it takes, to encourage people to take that path and to see it as the path, is actually an act of compassion.

Now, the idea that anything goes in spiritual life actually dates back to

the Romantics. Their idea was that you're trying to embrace the whole world, the infinitude of the world, and that that requires you to step back and look at yourself from an infinite perspective. From that perspective, you realize that whatever you might think—no matter how sincerely you might think it—can be only one small possibility among all the infinite possibilities in the world. This is supposed to open you up to being more creative in your expression of your spiritual feelings and not being bound by things that you or anyone else has expressed in the past.

Religious truths, for them, were simply works of art, expressive art, expressing your feelings on the subject of infinity. And, as when you're making any new work of art, you don't have to be consistent with the works of art you did before. After all, you're not expected to give a true description of infinity, because no finite being can do such a thing. The only truth that's asked of you is that you're true in how you express your feelings about infinity as you feel them right here and now.

It all sounds very large-minded: an art expressing infinity. And because it's art, it sounds like it's something higher than a craft. But what the Buddha taught was a craft. Instead of trying to be an artist, he took on the role of a master craftsman. He had mastered this skill and he wanted to pass it on to us. It's a very focused skill, focusing in on your mind and seeing what in the mind causes you to create suffering.

It's also a battle. There's winning and losing. There's doing the skill well and there's doing it poorly.

Now, there's a frame of mind that thinks that this sort of dualistic thinking is narrow. A craft focused on the issue of suffering sounds less exalted than an art focused on infinity. But when you look at the results, you realize, in this case, that the craft is better than the art. Instead of leaving you to wallow around in the expression of your feelings, it actually accomplishes something. It takes you out of suffering entirely, to a dimension beyond the world. And it honors you by saying that you're capable of doing this.

So, the Buddha's not handing out hot dogs to everybody. But he is doing something much more compassionate: treating us like adults—and asking us, do we want to be adults, too? If we do, this is how we do it. And even though it's "just a craft" and not a creative, expressive art, it takes us a lot further than just learning to be expressive. And the results are a lot larger, more encompassing, and far more worthwhile.

Clinging, Addictions, Obsessions

December 27, 2015

As the Buddha said, suffering is the clinging-aggregates. The aggregates themselves are related to the way we feed, and clinging is related to the way we feed as well. The word for clinging—*upadana*—can also mean sustenance and the act of taking sustenance from things. Of course, we don't usually think of feeding as suffering. For most of us, that's how we get our pleasure in life, that's how we keep going as beings. We take lots of pleasure in thinking about feeding, planning for feeding, and then in the actual feeding itself.

This is where the Buddha's teachings go against the grain. But our suffering is strong, so it needs something that goes very strongly against the grain, against our attachment to our suffering, if we're going to end it. As Ajaan Suwat used to like to say, "Our likes are what makes us suffer." Food is one of the big likes in life, and the act of feeding is one of the big likes in life, too. So we need pretty strong medicine to counteract our attachment to them.

When you look at the types of clinging, you'll see that they're very closely related to the way we feed. Sensuality clinging has to do with our fascination with thinking about the food we're going to take—what we're going to have tomorrow; how we're going to fix it; how good it's going to taste. We can think about that for long periods of time, much longer than the actual amount of time we spend eating the food.

Then there's clinging to habits and practices: the way we feed; the kinds of things we will do in order to get food; our ideas of which ways of looking for food are legitimate and which ones are not; and, once you've got the food, how you fix it. We tend to identify ourselves very strongly with this: people who are vegan; people who are gluten-free; people who won't take soy; people who eat nothing but soy. The list is very long. It just keeps getting longer and longer, it seems.

As for how the food has to be fixed, there are lots of views in the world out there: what counts as food; what doesn't count as food; which foods are worthwhile, which ones are not. This morning I was mentioning to a group of visitors the fact that I'm on statins right now, and I received a long, long series of lectures about whether they were good or bad. The same goes for

lots of different kinds of foods.

Finally there's your sense of yourself as the person who's being fed by all this: who you are; what kind of person looks for food in a certain way; what kind of person eats certain kinds of food; what kind of person is going to be benefiting from the food; what kind of person you're going to become as a result of eating in a certain way. We're all very much attached to these things.

You see this particularly in our obsessions, our addictive behavior—because we feed not only on food but also on types of behavior and ideas and our relationships with other people. Some of these things can get pretty addictive and obsessive, and we know they're unhealthy, but we keep going back for them.

They're primary examples of what the Buddha's talking about when he talks about clinging, so it's wise to analyze them in the Buddha's terms. See that the strength of the addiction lies in the different kinds of clinging. For example, sensuality: your fascination with thinking about how good it's going to be; the pleasure you're going to get out of that particular kind of thinking or addiction. And even when a large part of the mind realizes it's bad for you, there's another part that really goes for it and is thoroughly convinced it's a good thing. You have to ferret that out, and you have to argue with it.

Then there are habits and practices. We tend to be very quick to fall into old habitual ways of behaving. And because we've practiced them so often and follow through with them so often, they seem almost effortless. Any other way of looking for pleasure goes very strongly against the grain.

Our views about what types of pleasure there are out there, our views about how responsible we are for what's going to happen down the line: This is a big addiction, because the addictive mind set, the obsessive mind set, just says, "Well, I'm going to go for my pleasure right now, and who cares about the future because the future is uncertain, but this hit or this type of behavior seems to be pretty certain." That, too, is a kind of view.

And your sense of who you are: When you start identifying with that addictive part of your personality, that becomes your identity, and you find it harder and harder to think about other ways of doing things, of being a person who does things in other ways. You tend to think that you're incapable of doing them. Or that you try for a while and then you give up and say that that's proof you can't do it, that you can't get away from your old behavior.

So we need strong medicine to counteract this. And this is what the

noble eightfold path is for. It's meant to attack these different kinds of clinging.

Sensuality has to be replaced with right resolve and with the desire in right effort. You have to learn how to motivate yourself to say, "There must be something better in life." You think about how much better it would be if you didn't give in to that particular kind of pleasure. Resolve for renunciation, for harmlessness: You don't want to harm yourself. You don't want to have ill will for yourself, because often there's that aspect to an addiction: You get apathetic about the impact of your pleasure seeking, and treat yourself as worthless. Instead, think about how good it would be to be free. Those two factors—right resolve and right effort—help to replace the clinging to sensuality.

As for habits and practices, the path recommends that we take on new habits: the habits of right action, right speech, right livelihood. Take the precepts and you'll find that you can actually follow through with them, and that life really does get better as a result. You're creating fewer and fewer problems for yourself. Then there's the practice of concentration: This is right mindfulness and right concentration. You find that these alternative forms of pleasure are better to pursue—and that you can tap into them.

Addictive views, of course, have to be replaced with right views. One of the lessons of right view is that the important issue in life is not the pleasure that you're sucking out of life, but the things you're doing and the consequences they're going to have down the line. You have to take those things very seriously. Because, as Ajaan Suwat liked to say, "Those sensual pleasures you had last week: Where are they now?" They're totally gone; but you are left with the kamma. If you don't believe in kamma, just look at the habits you've developed. You get into these old ruts: these old ways of thinking, these old ways of behaving. The more you indulge them, the harder they are to get out of. That's what you're left with: the habit, which is accompanied by a large sense of lack. You're left with the action. So you have to see this very clearly, and realize that it's causing a lot of suffering.

This is something that we tend to turn a blind eye to—both the suffering we cause ourselves and the suffering we cause to others. It's very easy to say, "Well, it doesn't matter," or "It's unavoidable," or "It's a part of embracing all of life"—that's a big one. Recently I was reading somebody saying how life is wonderful, and therefore we have to see everything in life as wonderful, including aging, illness, death, and all the horrible things that people do to one another. But the Buddha never said that. You have to take seriously the fact that our actions are leading to suffering, and a lot of the suffering is

pointless. It accomplishes nothing aside from bringing torment.

So we have to replace the views of our addictive thinking with right views, starting with mundane right view about kamma, and then right view about suffering and its causes. We have to see the suffering in feeding on our old behavior. That's suffering right there, and you've got to see it.

So there we have all the factors of the path.

As for the doctrines of the self, that's also related to right view, and in particular to your sense of who you are in relationship to the kinds of pleasure you like to think about, the skills you have. For most of us, addictive behavior comes from a lack of alternative skills. But if you practice the alternative skills, you become a new person: the kind of person who has those skills. As Ajaan Lee would often say, "Don't be too quick to go for inconstancy, stress, and not-self." He says, "You want to develop concentration so that you can have a sense of constancy in your mind, something that you can hold onto. Something that's pleasant; something that's under your control."

There's going to be a sense of self you build around that. That then becomes your new sense of self who finds it easier and easier to resist your old addictive self, with its addictive ways of thinking and its addictive behavior.

So you take the path and you use it to counteract all your forms of clinging. And it's important to see that these teachings on clinging are not very abstract; they're very closely related to the way we feed off of things. The path is there to give us an alternative way of feeding, a way that—instead of sapping our strength—actually builds our strength. It gets the mind more and more sensitive to what real happiness is.

Because everything all comes down to this desire for happiness. Someone was saying today that she had trouble seeing that she deserved happiness. But the Buddha never talks about deserving happiness or not deserving happiness. He was here to put an end to suffering, whether deserved or not. We can think about lots of different ways we might deserve to suffer or other people might deserve to suffer, but that's part of our views that are making us continue to suffer, unnecessarily. The opportunity to stop making yourself suffer is here. And in not placing the burden of suffering on yourself, you're putting less of a burden on other people. You're actually more able to help them.

So learn to straighten out your views around this whole issue of feeding. Straighten out your fascination with thinking about sensuality; start thinking about the topics of right resolve and right effort. There is desire there in

right effort. In fact, it's an important part. You have to learn to want to do it.

Learn how to talk yourself into wanting to follow the path. The parts of the mind that don't like to meditate will put up arguments, but you've got to have your arguments ready to go against them, so that you're not just going through the motions. You're actually looking directly into your breath right now; looking into your mind as it relates to the breath so that you can understand it.

Figure out this mind that's so obstreperous. You think it's you, you think it's yours, but there's so much in it that's going against your best interests. Learn how to be fascinated with trying to figure that out. Pick up the habits of the precepts, the practice of mindfulness and concentration, straighten out your views about what's important in life, what's possible in life, and you'll become a different person. And that different person will help carry you through—not only getting over the addictive behavior, but also learning how to master the skills, so that they go higher and higher.

There really is this potential within us for something deathless, so why are we dithering around with things that we know are harmful for ourselves? The deathless is there. It's attainable. When you develop the sense of self that says, "Okay, I can do this. I want to do this," then you can learn the skills and find that it's possible.

Eventually, that sense of self will actually take you to the point where you don't need it anymore. And when you let go of it, you're letting go not because you're disgusted with it or angry at it, which is how we tend to let go of certain members of our committee of selves. It's a raft. When it's taken you to the further shore, you leave it on the shore, but you leave it with a sense of appreciation. It's something that you cling to as you get across the river, and then you can let it go. You're standing on firm ground, as the Buddha said.

So use the path to get over all these forms of clinging. And even though you may not be on the firm ground of total awakening, you find that things are a lot more solid, a lot more reliable as you've got the path to hold onto. And you become more solid and more reliable, too: a better person to live with, both for yourself and for the people around you.

A Noble Warrior's Path

March 26, 2014

The Buddha was a member of the noble warrior caste—in fact, it's said that of the past seven Buddhas, only one was not a member of the warrior caste—and a warrior sensibility permeates his teachings. You see this with the imagery he uses, comparing a meditator to a skilled archer, to a soldier facing an approaching army, even to elephants and horses trained in battle. And this sensibility is not just in the imagery. It's in the content as well. The noble eightfold path bears a lot of similarities to the education of a soldier. You learn the right view on how to fight. You learn the right motivation: the resolve to come out victorious, and to do whatever is needed to achieve that end. You have a code of honor on what constitutes right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Right mindfulness keeps in mind what you've learned—keeps in mind how to analyze things so that you know which tactics to apply when you find yourself face-to-face with the enemy. Mindfulness helps you keep your wits about you, and right concentration keeps you steady and strong in the face of whatever comes up. You don't lose your head.

The most important similarity, of course, is that the Buddha's teachings are strategic, just like a soldier's or a warrior's. There's a story in Thai history that the Thais love to tell. Thailand had been conquered by the Burmese, and two princes of the Thai royal house were captured and taken to Burma—the idea being that Thailand was going to be a vassal state, so the princes needed to be trained to be good vassals to the Burmese king. While they were living in the palace of the Burmese king, they developed a rivalry with the king's son, the Burmese viceroy. The rivalry came to a head when all three of them were sent out to deal with a bandit with large forces who had holed up in a mountain fortress, plundering the countryside.

The viceroy was placed in charge of the first attack against the bandit. His tactic was just to lead a large army up the road on the front of the mountain, but the bandit chief drove the viceroy and his forces back down again. Then it was the turn of the Thai princes. Their strategy was to send a small army up the road on the front of the mountain, which drew the armies of the bandit chief down the road. Meanwhile, the princes had led a larger army up the back of the mountain. They seized the bandit fortress and then the bandit chief along with all his forces. It's because they thought strategically that they won.

And as we're practicing here, we have to think strategically, too. There's a passage where Ven. Ananda talks about three things that the practice is aimed at abandoning—actually, we'll be giving up our need for these things as a result of the practice—but we need to use them in the meantime. And they parallel the things that you have to provide for soldiers. There's food, there's desire, and there's confidence.

As for food, as Napoleon said, an army has to march on its stomach. But our food here is right concentration, using it to gain a sense of well-being to sustain us along the way. What do you get the sense of well-being from? From the five aggregates. We know that eventually we're going to have to give them up, but first we need to get some use out of them. After all, they do have their uses—they offer their pleasures for all that they're stressful—so why throw them away? Even though our aim is the deathless, you have to realize that you can't use the deathless as a path. You can't use it for anything at all. It's outside of conditioned experience, so it's not a means to anything. That means you have to use the means, the conditioned things, you've got.

So you focus on the form of the body; you focus on the breath, as you feel it. Breathe in a way that gives rise to feelings of well-being and ease. Hold a perception of the breath in mind and try to adjust the perception so that it allows you to breathe in a way that's really comfortable. You have to question your perceptions if your breathing feels cramped or tight. Maybe you're perceiving the breath in the wrong way. What other ways can you picture it to yourself? Experiment. And as you're thinking about your breath and evaluating it, that's the aggregate of fabrication. Meanwhile, your consciousness is aware of all of these things.

So you've got the five aggregates right here in right concentration, which is your nourishment on the path. Without the well-being and nourishment that come from right concentration, the path gets dry pretty fast.

And as for perceptions of the three characteristics, don't apply them too quickly to what you're doing. There's a passage in the commentaries describing the three characteristics as the Buddha's categorical teaching—in other words, the teaching that's true across the board. But the Buddha didn't treat them that way. There are only two teachings in the whole Canon that he treats as categorical. One is the four noble truths, and the other is the principle that skillful qualities should be developed and unskillful ones should be abandoned. Those two teachings are true across the board.

As the Buddha showed, the three characteristics—or rather, the three perceptions—should be applied only in certain times and certain places.

There was once a young monk who was asked by a wanderer from another sect what the results of kamma were, and the monk said, “Stress.” Then the monk went back to the Buddha and asked him if he’d given the right answer, and the Buddha said, “No. When asked about kamma, you talk about how skillful kamma leads to pleasure, how unskillful kamma leads to pain.” Another one of the other monks piped up and said, “Well, wasn’t he thinking about the fact that all feelings are stressful?” And the Buddha replied, essentially, that that was not the time or place for that teaching.

So, an important part of strategy is knowing which teachings to use when—and not jumping the gun or trying to skip over things.

When you’re practicing concentration, apply the three perceptions—or any other type of contemplation that would give rise to dispassion—to the things that would pull you out of concentration. But while you’re trying to develop the concentration, you don’t focus on the fact that the concentration is inconstant—because in the very beginning it’s all too obviously inconstant. You want to focus on making it as constant and pleasant and under your control as possible. For the time being, you have to push against the three characteristics. Otherwise, you won’t have the strength you need to stick with the path.

This is where Ven. Ananda’s other two factors come in. Soldiers need motivation in order to fight. And the motivation comes down to two things: one is the desire to win, and the other is the confidence that you can. The desire that Ananda talked about here comes from hearing that other people have achieved awakening, so you want that, too. Of course, the desire has to be focused properly, not just on the goal but—primarily—on the means to the goal. So you focus right here: each breath coming in, each breath going out. Each breath is the next step on your path. It’s through developing the path that the goal is found. The path and the goal are not the same thing. But it’s by focusing totally on the path right here that the goal will appear right here. So there’s an intimate connection between the two. And your desire to take this path to the goal is what keeps you going.

As for the confidence, it’s a quality that in Pali is called conceit, *mana*. Here Ananda isn’t telling you to be conceited. Instead, he’s telling you to have the confidence that if other people can do this, they’re human beings; I’m a human being; they can do it, why can’t I? This is what gives you the confidence to keep on going, even when the going is tough.

Ultimately, we want to get rid of desire and conceit, but we have to use them on the path. If you don’t have desire to get to the end of the path, you’re just going to lie down on the path. And we know what happens when

people lie down on paths. They get trampled or run over. If you don't have the confidence, you give up even before you've tried. So as a soldier, you need your food. You need your desire, you need your confidence, your conceit. You use these things strategically. That conceit here is a healthy sense of self; you want to develop that. The desire is part of right effort. And the food is right concentration.

So all these elements of the path are strategic. You learn to use them when they're appropriate and to put them aside when they're not. When the job is done, you put everything aside. But until you're done, there are things you've got to develop, things you've got to work at. And there are times when it's going to get discouraging. That's when you have to learn how to give yourself good pep talks, to strengthen that sense of confidence, strengthen the sense of desire. When you're feeling weak, look for where you can find food. If you can't get the food of right concentration, learn to develop the food of generosity, the food of virtue. All these things are nourishing to the heart. Reflection on your generosity and reflection on your virtue help to give rise to that sense of confidence—and to the sense of honor that we're doing something really noble here.

And it's important to remember that the noble warriors were not just men; there were female noble warriors as well. If you were a female member of the noble warrior caste, you had to learn a lot of these attitudes, too. You knew the men in the family were going into danger, so you had to learn skills to support them. The female noble warriors were the surgeons. Their husbands, their brothers, and sons would come home with arrows in them, and it was the duty of the women to get the arrows out. So they had to have a brave and unflinching spirit, too.

So it's good to remember that the Buddha's knowledge is warrior knowledge, i.e., knowledge of skills to be used in difficult situations so that you can come out victorious.

Back in the old days, they made a distinction between warrior knowledge and scribe knowledge. Scribe knowledge was just the knowledge of words and definitions. As for warrior knowledge, it needs to use words, too, but it's more concerned with their strategic uses: to train you in skills, to develop your ingenuity, to fire up your fighting spirit, to give you maxims to keep in mind when the going gets tough so that you can approach difficult situations with skill. To keep those words in mind, those instructions in mind, without losing your presence of mind in difficult situations: That's the function of right mindfulness. But in particular, the qualities of right view, right resolve, right effort, and right concentration are your warrior

strategies. And it's worth your while to develop them as skills.

Comparing Mind

September 29, 2015

A couple of years back, I came across a photography book in which the photographer presented pictures of many scenes, with two different pictures of each scene. The larger was the one that he preferred. The second one was paired with it to give a sense of what was better about the larger one.

Seeing the two photographs right next to each other was very educational, because you could see that, yes, the larger one was better—not because it was larger but for a lot of other reasons: the composition, the color palette, the point of view.

It was a good book for training your eye, whether you're planning to become a photographer yourself or just wanting to learn how to appreciate photography. It's good to have your eye trained that way, having something to compare so that you can see, "Yes, this is different from that, this is better than that." And you begin to understand why.

It's the same with meditation. We're here comparing mind-states. We're trying to get the mind into a better state than it normally would be in if it were just left to its own devices. And to get a sense of what's more skillful and what's less skillful, it's good to have comparisons.

This is one of the reasons why you have to meditate so much: so that you can begin to have a range of comparisons as to what kind of concentration is skillful concentration, what kind of concentration is a little foggy; when you're putting too much pressure on it, when you're not putting enough. You need things to compare. And this is a skillful use of the comparing mind.

The Buddha calls this "analysis of qualities." It's one of the factors for awakening. He defines it very simply as making the distinction between what's skillful and what's not. And, of course, "skillful" has many levels.

Luang Pu Dune made a similar comment one time, saying that, with regard to developing insight, "Once the mind gets still, you start comparing things." He said, "Things that are dark, things that are bright"—meaning, of course, dark and bright states of mind.

You compare the results of what you're doing so that you can gain a sense of what's skillful, what's not. Then you have to connect the results to what you're doing so that you can gain a sense of how to change what you're

doing if it's not coming out the way you want it, or if there are better ways of doing it.

This willingness to ask these questions is what keeps your meditation alive. Otherwise, you start drifting off, getting kind of drowsy, trying to force the mind to stay with one thing, and as it stays with one thing it begins to get dull—because the mind is used to jumping around: liking this, liking that, then deciding it doesn't like this, running over there to something else. And it gets entertained as it jumps around.

But here we're asking you to stay still. Still but alert. And one of the best ways of staying alert is to ask questions. Start with simple things like, "What kind of breath does the body need now?" And breathe that way for a while. Then change it, breathe in another way, and then compare.

If you're not sure about the results of your comparison, well, try something else. Breathe in a different way, and then a different way, until you finally gain a sense that the breath has this kind of influence on the mind, this kind of influence on the body. That way, you can start learning how to read what the body and the mind need.

It's not the case that there's one ideal breath for concentration. Sometimes, when the body is tired, it needs an energizing breath. When it's tense, it needs one that's more relaxing. When you're carrying some issues in from the day, sometimes you have to do some work first, some active contemplation, to get the mind ready to stay with the breath. That's something you've got to learn how to read, too.

So to read, you have to compare. All too often we hear that you shouldn't make use of the comparing mind in your meditation. If you're just on meditation retreat for a weekend or so, that might be good advice. Otherwise, if you're trying to force the results of your short time on retreat, you get all tied up in knots.

But when you think of meditation as a lifelong activity, which it is, you're working on developing the mind. You're aiming at results. And the mind is always going to need developing in one direction or another until you reach full awakening. There's always more work to be done. And the more work you do, the more good work you do, the more you benefit.

So if you think of this as a lifelong activity, you've got to learn how to compare. Otherwise, the meditation doesn't become a skill. It's just a random shot in the dark. You shoot up in the air, and maybe once in a while you hit something, but there's no skill, there's no system to it, there's no science to it. It's all very random.

You don't want your meditation to be random. Certain causes lead to

certain results, and a large part of discernment lies in seeing the connection between causes and results—and having a sense of which ones are better. As you learn to ask yourself these questions, it gets you out of the dullness of a concentration that's just sitting there getting drowsier and duller and drowsier and duller.

You have to take an interest in what's going on in your mind. Part of this, of course, requires learning how to figure out when's a good time to ask questions and when to just stick with one object without too much thinking. That's something you've got to learn how to read, too.

If you ask too many questions, you get pulled away. There's a right time for questions, and there are right and wrong questions. And a number one question to avoid is, "Is my meditation better than somebody else's? Or is it worse than somebody else's? Or am I a better person than somebody else?" That kind of comparing mind is to be put aside.

If you want to learn from other people, then it's okay to ask if someone else is doing something better than you are, for the purpose of trying to adopt their skill and make it your own. But if you simply want to compare just for the sake of comparison, remember how arbitrary that kind of measurement can be. "Better" can be measured in many different ways. Sometimes we get good at a particular skill and other people are not quite as good in the technical side of the skill, and there's some pride that comes around that. But then other people may be bringing a better attitude to their skill—in which case, you're worse than they are.

So if you find yourself comparing yourself with other people, try to focus in on the actions that you can learn from. And even then you have to learn how to look all around.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about the pride he developed over the fact that he was able to observe the dhutanga practices better than any of the other monks staying with Ajaan Mun. But Ajaan Mun would every now and then do a little something to get in the way of Ajaan Maha Boowa's dhutanga practice just to show him that it's not all about the ability to stick to the rules. There's a quality of the heart, a quality of the attitude, the pride, that you've got to watch out for, too. Being really good is something that's all-around.

And because we tend to side with ourselves, we have to be very careful about this: how we measure what's skillful and what's not. We have to learn how to use our comparing mind skillfully if we're going to get some benefit out of it.

Again, this is one of the reasons why people have warned about comparing mind. But just telling yourself, "Well, don't compare," doesn't

allow you to learn anything. You have to learn how to compare different ways of comparing to see which ones are more useful, more skillful, which ones get more well-rounded results.

So look at your actions and see if you can look at them again, from many different angles, to see what's lacking. Sometimes, say, with the meditation, you may be doing the technique okay but something else is lacking: either the ability to ask the right questions or just having a sense of what's better than what. What kind of mind-state is really useful for the practice, what kind of mind-states actually get in the way? Even though they may seem nice on the surface, you've got to live with these things for a while to really read them.

So the ability to develop a skill, to develop some maturity in your comparing mind: that's what helps develop the meditation as a genuine skill, an all-around skill—something that changes not only the state of your mind but also changes the state of your heart. Because, after all, we're training the whole heart and the whole mind, not just part of it.

This means that your powers of judgment should learn how to be all-around, looking at things from many angles. That way, the meditation becomes more than just a skill. It can lead to a real revolution inside.

Intelligent about Change

July 22, 2016

Not all change is good, not all change is bad—and not all change is important.

There are basically two kinds of change that are important. One is the fact that we tend to look for happiness in things that are going to change, hoping that they'll last, hoping that they'll be reliable. And again and again and again, we're disappointed, like the person who kept eating hot peppers hoping to find a sweet one someday. That kind of change is the change you have to accept, so that you can go beyond it. But it's important to understand what "acceptance" means here. You don't just accept the fact that things change and leave it at that. You set your sights higher, looking for a happiness that doesn't change.

The other kind of change that's really important is the fact that your mind is so changeable. As the Buddha once said, it's so quick to change that even he couldn't think of a good analogy for how quick it was. Here he was, the master of analogies, and even he couldn't find an analogy for how quickly the mind can change. The twinkling of an eye is still slower than the mind when it's ready to change. And that's the kind of change you have to fight. Once the mind is in good shape, you have to resist its tendency to change.

To deal with the first type of change, you have to develop discernment.

To deal with the second type, you have to develop mindfulness.

You hear again and again the ajaans in Thailand talking about how the essential factors of the path are mindfulness and discernment. The two words—sati and pañña—go together in Thai. In fact, in Thai when you put the two together as a compound—sati-pañña, mindfulness and discernment—it means intelligence.

And that's what intelligence is. It's not a matter of trying to see that all change is good or all change is bad, or that all change is something to be accepted. Instead, you're discerning, and you figure out how to deal properly with whatever change comes your way.

With regard to the things that the mind tries to find happiness in: That's when you have to develop discernment around the three perceptions, to see where these things are inconstant, and the fact that they're inconstant

means that they're stressful. You can't really find a lasting happiness there. And if something is inconstant and stressful, is it worth calling your self? Is it worth identifying with? Is it worth pursuing as your basis for happiness? These perceptions are tools for peeling away your attachments to things that change in that way.

But what are you going to do, as you keep pulling away your attachments? Where are you left?

That's where mindfulness comes in. As the Buddha says, the duty of mindfulness is not just to watch things arise and pass away. Its actual duty is to actively give rise to things that are skillful and to help unskillful things pass away more quickly. This is what you've got to remember. Right mindfulness deals with the things you need to keep in mind as you try to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. If something skillful comes up in the mind, you don't just simply watch it come and go and say, "Well, that's change." You remember to do your best to make it arise. When it's there, you remember to do your best to keep it coming, to keep it in place, and to let it grow. As for unskillful things, you remember to do your best to get rid of them. Once you're rid of them, you remember to make sure they don't come back.

It's by overcoming this second kind of change—the changeability of the mind—that you actually give yourself the strength you need in order to deal with the first kind of change, analyzing it with your discernment.

To do this, you've got to develop all the strengths of the mind. There are basically five, and all five are things you want to work at bringing into being so that when you feel weak, you have something to fall back on. When the mind feels very susceptible to change, wanting to give up in its pursuit of what's really good for it and to accept a less-than-ideal happiness, you want to be able to remind yourself that you've got strengths to sustain you through the tough patches along the path.

At the very least, you've got conviction that the Buddha was right: that human beings can do this, can put an end to suffering, and that it's a really worthwhile project. Even if the project goes more slowly than you would hope, you can't say, "Well, I'll just give up on this for the time being and pursue something else," because this thought will then be constantly nagging away at the back of the mind, trying to pull you off the path. You've got to have conviction that the Buddha could do it. He was a human being, he could do it; you're a human being, you can do it, too. That's the attitude he has you take. Even though that's a form of conceit, it's useful conceit.

What you're doing here, as you're developing these strengths, is that

you're taking things that are impermanent, but you're turning them into the path. In Ven. Ananda's image, when he was once talking to the Buddha, he praised the Buddha for teaching how to go across a river by going from one dependence to another. In other words, you can't just fly across the river. You've got to step here, step there, on a rock here, a rock there. The rocks may be a little bit wobbly and unstable, but they're stable enough for you to walk across the river on. That's what you've got to depend on to get to firm ground.

From that conviction comes persistence. You stick with the path and you use whatever tool comes to hand. A true warrior is not very picky about his weapons. He tries to have the best weapons possible, of course, but when they're not at hand, he has to use what is at hand. That's when unexpected things can show their power.

There was a movie years back called Willow. It was a big flop here in the States but a wild success in Asia. It told the story of a cheap village magician who had one little trick, and it was a pretty cheap trick. That's how he made his living. It was good enough to wow his fellow peasants. But then he gets swept up in a big battle between sorcerers and sorceresses, and at the very end, he's facing off against the ultimate enemy. And it turns out that that cheap little trick he played to fool the other peasants actually works against the super sorcerer.

So you have to remember: whatever trick works in keeping the mind here in the present moment, keeping it from slipping into unskillful qualities—whether it's a sophisticated trick or an unsophisticated trick, you don't have to worry. If it works, it works, and sometimes when your defilements get really sophisticated, a blunt instrument or a cheap trick is what you need to deal with them.

So you stick with it. You keep at the practice regardless. And having the kind of momentum that "Whatever comes up, I'm going to deal with it the best I can": It may be kind of scrappy and you may not succeed every time, but at least having that attitude—that if it's unskillful, fight it; if it's skillful, encourage it—this is what you've got to keep in mind.

This is where mindfulness becomes a strength. You remember what you need to do, and how to get past the tricks of the defilements, and you see the results that come from actually doing what you remember you should do. Seeing those results encourages you to make your mindfulness even stronger. For example, an unskillful voice in the mind may say, "Well, you're going to give in anyhow, so why don't you give in now and make it easy for all of us?" You've got to remember that you've fallen for that voice

many, many times before, and what you're responsible for right now is right now. As for what you're going to do five minutes down the line, you say, "We'll deal with that five minutes down the line, but right now we're fighting."

And if you keep on having that attitude right now, right now, right now, it gets you well past the five minutes.

Gradually, as your mindfulness gets stronger and more consistent, you develop the strength of concentration. We were talking today about the strength of the breath. Well, what makes the breath strong is your focus. The focus strengthens the breath, and then as the breath gets more consistently comfortable, you find that it gets easier to stay focused. The two qualities help each other along—strength of focus and strength of body—but the preliminary strength comes from your concentration. So remember that strength of mind is what matters most, much more than the strength of the body.

Because, after all, the body's going to leave us. It's something we think we can depend on indefinitely—no matter how much we know that we're going to die, we have this attitude that this body's going to be different—but it's not. And it can surprise you how it comes up with diseases you wouldn't have thought possible. When it does, you need strength of mind, the attitude that regardless of what the body does, you're not going to be fazed. You're going to keep doing your best.

Years back there was a woman suffering from cancer who went to stay with Ajaan Maha Boowa for a couple of months, together with her friend who was an old retired doctor. Ajaan Maha Boowa gave a long series of Dhamma talks for her benefit every evening. Finally the woman went back home, and ultimately died.

Her friend the doctor was still around. And she got the tapes that the woman had made of all the talks. So the old doctor, even though her eyesight was going, tried to see, "Can I transcribe all the tapes?" And she did.

She said that she took encouragement from Ajaan Maha Boowa's comment that, as your body gets older, you want to see how much good you can still squeeze out of it. She was past eighty, but she was still able to transcribe two enormous Dhamma books. So even though the process was slower than getting a professional or someone who was younger to do it, still it meant a lot to her that she could manage it herself.

We should all have that attitude. Squeeze what you can out of what you've got. As you keep working with your tools as they are, you finally do get into good concentration. Again, whether it happens quickly or slowly,

and whether it's how you imagined it might be or not: None of those things matter. What matters is that you ultimately get there.

Of course, in doing this, you develop the strength of discernment as you learn the tricks of the trade: how to get the mind to settle down, how to get the mind to stay there, and how to keep your guard up for whatever is going to come along and destroy your concentration.

And ultimately you even begin to see what in the concentration is still an unnecessary burden, and you can let that go, too.

This is a lot of the strength of discernment: It's a strength that comes when you see you carry around too many loads, and you begin to realize, "Oh, this a load I can let go of; this is another load I can let go of." That's one of the signs of wisdom: your ability to see which things really are your responsibility and which things are not. And as you lighten your load, then even though the strength of the body may be declining, still the fact that the load on the mind is lighter means that your mind can manage it.

These issues all fall under that second kind of change: the change you want to remember to stop, to prevent good but changeable things in the mind from slipping away. You do this by fighting whatever is going to come and try to destroy them. Remembering this is the duty of mindfulness, but it pulls in discernment, it pulls in all your other good qualities as well.

So as you look at change in yourself and change around you, remember that certain changes are a lot more important than others, and they have to take priority.

First, the changes where you have to use your discernment to accept the fact that they will change, and to learn to release yourself from any attachment to them; and then, second, the changes where you fight the change so as to maintain the good qualities of the mind. Mindfulness can slip away so easily, concentration can slip away so easily, but you're going to be mindful to fight against that happening. You try to develop and maintain these things—because, after all, that's one of the duties of the four noble truths: to develop and maintain the factors of the path.

All too often, people talk about the three characteristics—or the three perceptions—totally without reference to the four noble truths. The four noble truths carry four different duties, and one of those duties is to develop concentration, to develop mindfulness. You don't just watch these things come and go. Then, within the context of the four noble truths, you use the three perceptions to help with the duties of each truth: to comprehend stress, to abandon the cause, to realize cessation, and to develop the path.

So make sure you keep your duties straight, and use some intelligence

around change. Use your discernment, use your mindfulness, so that you can gain the good that comes from managing change in the proper way.

Finally, of course, by doing this you get to something that doesn't change. Those good qualities enable the mind to open up to another dimension that's totally free from change. That's why we work on them. Ultimately, they will fall away. After all they're part of the path, and the path is fabricated. But the goal isn't fabricated. Once attained, it doesn't fall away.

The path doesn't cause the goal. It takes you there. And the goal is something else entirely. So even when the factors of the path fall away, the goal remains. It's like climbing a ladder up to a house. Once you're in the house, it doesn't matter if the ladder falls away, because you have no more need for it. The house is so good that you'll never have to leave, or even want to leave. It's that good.

This means that we focus on change, learning to be intelligent about change, so that we can find a basis for happiness that really is worthwhile, one that's not going to change on us at all. Once you've found that, you can let everything else go, because what you've found doesn't need any support or any improvement at all. It's the ultimate happiness, and it won't let you down.

Right View about Right View

February 26, 2016

There are only two principles that the Buddha said are categorical—in other words, true across the board in all situations. One is the principle that skillful thoughts, words, and deeds should be developed, and unskillful ones should be abandoned. The other principle is the four noble truths.

Now, you notice that the three characteristics are not on that list. In fact, the word “three characteristics” is never applied by the Buddha to the teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self. He calls them perceptions. In a couple of cases, they’re also called contemplations, which means that they’re ways of looking at things. When you try to map these perceptions or contemplations onto the four noble truths, it’s best to think of them as tools for furthering the duties appropriate to the truths: to develop dispassion for suffering, to abandon its cause, to realize its cessation, and to develop the path. In other words, they’re meant to serve a purpose. And because they don’t qualify as categorical, that means that they’re useful only for certain times and situations. It’s important to keep that point in mind.

The forest ajaans bring this point out in their teachings. In some passages they describe how things are not only inconstant, but also constant; not only stressful, but also pleasant; not only not-self, but self. Think about the challenge that Ajaan Maha Boowa made one time. He said, “Try to prove the Buddha wrong.” In this case, this means trying to see if there are any things that are constant. And in certain ways, there are. As Ajaan Lee points out, your lower lip has never turned into your upper lip. Your arm has never turned into your leg. The elements always stay the same. Solidity has always been solidity and hasn’t turned into anything else. So there is that constant aspect to things. Or, as Ajaan Chah points out, the way in which things change is pretty constant. So you could latch onto the fact that things are constant. You could latch onto the way in which they’re inconstant. The question is, what happens when you don’t latch on, and instead simply use these perceptions when they’re appropriate?

Similarly with pleasure and pain. The Buddha himself points out that the five aggregates are not only painful, not totally stressful. They also have their pleasant side. If they didn’t offer any pleasure, no one would be attached to them.

At the same time, there are also plenty of passages in the Canon that talk about the need to develop a skillful sense of self. And there are passages talking about not-self. Ajaan Lee, too, talks about seeing the side of things that is inconstant, stressful and not-self, and the side that's constant, easeful and under your control.

But the point is you have to learn to let go of both sides if you want to get to something unfabricated. Someone once asked Ajaan Maha Boowa whether nibbana is self or not-self, and he replied that nibbana is nibbana. In other words, you have to contemplate self and not-self in order to get there, but once you've gotten there, it's something different entirely.

All this relates to two main points that are important in the practice. One is that when the ajaans talk about conventional truths, they don't contrast them with ultimate truths. In other words, they don't maintain, for example, that to say that there's such a person as Lionel or Isabella or Than Isaac, or whoever, is just a conventional truth; whereas saying that they're aggregates is an ultimate truth. Instead, the ajaans contrast conventional truths with release, which means that even talking about everybody here in terms of aggregates would still be a convention. So these are conventions. They're to be used. When properly used, they lead to something that's not words, but we need to use the words to get there. We need to use the truths.

That's one important point: that we're not here to arrive at right view; we're here to use right view to go beyond. This means that you need to have right view about right view, in other words, realizing that that's not the goal. It's part of the path.

The other point relates to what are called vipassanuppakilesa: the corruptions of insight. These can happen very easily when you're meditating and—especially when you're off alone—you come across some sort of experience that really impresses you with its truth or its power, and you latch onto it, saying, "This must be true. This must be right." Well, we're not here to get to truthness or rightness. We use truths and we use rightness to go beyond them. But if you just latch onto them, you've misused them right there.

So one of the reasons that the ajaans talk about going beyond right and wrong and true and false is because when you latch onto true and false, it can really cause you a lot of trouble. It can get in the way of any further progress in the path, especially if you believe you've arrived at some noble attainment simply because you've seen the truth of some teaching related to the three perceptions, such as "seeing" that there is no self.

So remember, these truths are here to be used. They're here to perform.

They perform a duty and then you put them aside. Like woodworking tools: You use them when you build a chair or a desk, but when you're finished, you put them aside. In this way, you have right view about right view. You use the rightness of the path and it is a right path, because it works. But it is a path.

We're working on developing dispassion, but we need to have some passion for the path, to develop it. We use it to develop dispassion for everything off the path, and only then do we develop dispassion for it, too. So when you discover a truth, ask yourself, "What's the use of this truth now? In what way is it useful for the things I have to develop dispassion for? In which ways is it useless? In which ways is it going to have a bad effect on my mind?" That's what you always want to look at: "What is the effect that this has on the mind?" If you see that it gives rise to passion, well, you treat it the same way you treat any pleasure or pain: "How does it relate to the duties of the path that I have to do now?"

Certain pleasures, the Buddha said, are totally harmless, but other pleasures can be bad for you, so you've got to abandon the pleasures that are harmful. The same way with pains—and the same way with truths: There are some truths that are harmful for your practice right now. For instance, you're trying to develop concentration. This is not the time to be thinking about the inconstancy and stressfulness of your concentration. You can apply perceptions of inconstancy and stressfulness to the distractions that pull you away, but for the concentration, you want to focus on this question: What can you make constant here? What sensations can you develop in the body that are constant even as the breath flows in, the breath flows out? How do you make them easeful, pleasant? How do you get this under your control? This is an area to which you don't apply the three perceptions.

The same when you think about kamma. There's a time when certain truths should be used, and other times when they shouldn't. There is a sutta where one of the young monks is asked by someone from another religion, "What does the Buddha say is the result of action?" And the young monk says, "The result of action is pain." Now, that wanderer had heard enough about the Buddha's teachings to realize that this didn't sound right, so he said, "That's not what I've heard from anybody else. You'd better check that with the Buddha." So the young monk goes back and checks with the Buddha, and the Buddha says, "You fool. You gave a categorical answer to a question that required an analytical answer." Then Ven. Udayin, who's a regular troublemaker in a lot of the suttas says, "Well, maybe he was thinking about the fact that actions give rise to feelings, and feelings are stressful." The Buddha said, "This is not the context for that." When you talk

about action, you're talking about skillful and unskillful, and you want to induce people to do skillful actions, so you point to the truth that skillful actions lead to relative pleasure.

So there's a time and place for particular truths, and this is an important aspect of the teaching. We're not here to latch onto a truth, aside from holding it firmly enough as we're using it. You've got to see how it performs, because you can describe the world in all kinds of ways, but which description is going to be best at giving rise to dispassion? There's that sutta where a group of monks are going abroad to a part of India that wasn't in the Middle Country in India and before they go, the Buddha tells them, "First, take your leave of Sariputta." So they take leave of Sariputta, and he says, "When intelligent people there ask you, 'What does your teacher teach?' What are you going to say?" The monks replied, "We really would like to hear what you would have us say."

So Sariputta says that the first thing to say is, "Our teacher teaches the ending of passion."

Notice, he doesn't mention the three characteristics, or emptiness, or compassion, or even the four noble truths. He starts out with the ending of passion. Now, as another sutta says, dispassion is the highest dhamma. It's what all the other teachings are meant to induce. Even when the Buddha gives the questionnaire on the three perceptions: Is this constant or inconstant? Inconstant. If it's something inconstant, is it stressful or pleasant? Stressful. If it's inconstant and stressful, does it deserve to be self? No. Now, that's a value judgment. You're trying to develop dispassion through that questionnaire. That's what it's aimed at. It's supposed to perform: to do something to your sense of what's worth holding onto, and what's not.

This is where you have to use your powers of judgment and evaluation. When you come across something in your meditation where you think, "This is really true," you have to ask yourself, "True for what purpose?" And what does it do to your mind, keeping this particular truth in mind? If you see that it's having a bad effect, you tell yourself, "That's not the truth for right now." That's when you have to put aside that truth and any thoughts on that issue. Ultimately, all truths will have to be put aside, but you want to get the best use out of them, if they're useful, before letting them go. Treat them as tools, as means to an end, and then you'll be safe.

Not-self Is a Value Judgment

October 16, 2015

When the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son Rahula, he prefaced his teachings with some contemplations that provided groundwork for breath meditation. One of the contemplations is not-self, which may seem surprising because we usually think of the not-self teaching as something designed for the last stages of the path. And it is true that when the Buddha taught people to let go of everything, to learn to identify nothing at all as self, he was speaking largely to people who were on the verge of becoming arahants—people who'd followed the path, all the activities of the path, and now were ready to let go of those activities and any sense of self that lingered around them, to reach a state of mind that was beyond activity.

But even at the beginning of the path, it's useful to learn how to apply the reflection on not-self in a more selective way. In brief, the Buddha's trying to get us to see our sense of self as an activity. We do identify with things and our sense of identity changes all the time. We pick up something and identify with it and then we drop it to identify with something else.

The dropping, which is an act of not-selfing, is also a type of activity. You want to learn how to see how it happens while it's happening. All too often we don't see it because we're so intent on moving on to the next sense of self and then the next. What happens in the process of letting go of something you used to identify with: That's something you want to look into—and to take advantage of as you meditate.

As you're sitting here, you could take on lots of different identities. The identity you want right now is the identity of a meditator. An earnest meditator. You're here really trying to get some genuine results from what you're doing. But there are a lot of other identities lurking in the background of the mind. The identity of you at work, the identity of you at home, the identity of you as a feeder, as an enjoyer of sensual pleasures: all kinds of identities that you could take on right now.

For the time being at least, you have to learn how to not-self those identities. See that they're not worth taking on. That's what the whole idea of self and not-self is based on. It's not so much a metaphysical issue for most of us. It's a value judgment. And that's how the Buddha wants us to see it: as a value judgment. Is this particular self worth taking on? Or is it not? Is a

particular identity something that's really worth following through? The same questions apply to the actions that you take on when you assume that identity. Are they worth it?

This sort of calculation is something we're doing all the time, whether we're conscious of it or not.

I was talking this morning with someone who was commenting on how the not-self teaching seemed very rarefied. I told him, "Look, you're not-selfing all the time." As you take on an identity, say, at work, you take on your work identity and drop the identity you take on at home. Even when you're at work, you can drop your work identity as you start thinking about other things that are not related to your work. Then, when you realize you've got to get work done, you take your work identity back on again, along with every issue of craving and clinging with which this sense of self is tied up.

When the Buddha talks of the third noble truth, he says he wants you to see the mind as it lets go of craving and to realize the good things that come about when you let go of that craving. But ordinarily, when we let go of one craving we get so wound up into moving on to the next craving—and then the next—that we don't see the process of letting go.

So as you meditate—and this is why this is a preliminary contemplation—you want to get good at that ability to realize that you've taken on an identity and, if it's not something you want, you can not-self it. You have better identities to choose from. If you find yourself suddenly wandering off into the past by means of a little thought world, well, pull yourself out. This ability to pull out of an identity is a lot of what not-self is about: pulling out of those thought worlds. You see that the thought world, and your identity in the thought world, isn't worth it. And, of course, there'll be a voice in the mind that says, "Come on. Yes it is." This is where you need a sense of values that enables you to decide whether you can trust that voice or not.

Gaining a sense of values is one of the main points of the not-self teaching. What is your sense of values? What's important for you? Which identities do you want to develop? Which identities are worth developing? This is why the Buddha has us look at the arising of a sense of self, the passing away of a sense of self, the allure of a particular sense of self, and then the drawbacks of that sense of self: so that we can get beyond it.

That's the same pattern of inquiry that he has us adopt for every activity, skillful and unskillful. There are times when you drop unskillful activities for the sake of skillful ones, and then you drop certain skillful activities because you want to move onto something even more skillful. When you gain a sense of awareness and fluidity around this, you learn how to do it

more skillfully. If you find yourself stuck in a bad identity, you know there are ways of getting yourself out.

So when the Buddha's teaching not-self as a preliminary contemplation, it's like the first step they teach you in Thai boxing. Before they teach you how to hit or kick, they teach you how to back away from your opponent without exposing yourself to his kicks. In other words, retreat is the first thing you want to learn.

And the same principle applies in meditation. You're going to be sitting here meditating, focused on the breath, and all of a sudden the breath seems far away and you're in some other thought world. You want to be quick to recognize that and quick to see the disadvantages of staying with that thought world. And then retreat from it. Let it go.

There are other identities, of course, that you want to develop. Sitting here as a meditator, you want to be a good meditator. When you're at work, you want to be a good worker. If you're a part of a team, you want to be a good member of the team. In other words, realize that the identities you take on are choices you make. And you want to ask yourself, "What choices will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?"

When you start thinking of selfing and not-selfing as activities, you realize that they fit right in with the Buddha's teachings on kamma. Basic wisdom around kamma starts with the question, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" Well, insert the term "selfing" and "not-selfing" in that question: "What ways of selfing and not-selfing will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What ways of selfing and not-selfing will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?" That's the beginning of wisdom around the issues of self and not-self.

So learn to see the choice to self or to not-self as it happens, as you take on or drop an identity, either as the potential consumer of some happiness or as the person with the skills and abilities to bring that happiness about. See all that as a type of activity, as a type of kamma. Then ask yourself: "When is it skillful? When is it not? What types of selfing are skillful? When is it worth doing? When is it not?"

Again, not-self is a value judgment. The Buddha's not asking you to draw conclusions about whether or not there is a self in the larger metaphysical sense. Even when he was talking to people on the verge of becoming arahants giving them that questionnaire, notice how he phrased the questions:

"Form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness: Are they constant or inconstant?" — "They're inconstant."

“If they’re inconstant, are they easeful or stressful?” — “They’re stressful.”

And then the final question is not, “Then is there a self?” No, the question is: “Are things that are inconstant and stressful worth holding onto as self or as being claimed as me or mine?”

The answer is, “No.”

It’s a value judgment.

So get your values straight as to which of your identities you want to take on and which ones you don’t. Learn to see your identity as something fluid, moving and changing its shape all the time like an amoeba: sometimes looking like a horse, sometimes like a human being, sometimes like a deva, sometimes like a mouth with lots of fangs and teeth.

Years back, when I was in Japan, I ran across a cartoon character called “The Children’s Police,” a little tiny fat guy with an extremely malleable face. He seemed to be pure id. Whatever emotion was going through him would change the shape of his face. If he was angry, his nose would turn into a gun. If he was feeling lust, his nose got obscene.

Inside, we’re not all that different. Our nose doesn’t change shape that much as we go through the day, but if you could look at your sense of self, you’d find it changing shape all over the place, extending little pseudopods here or there.

We tend to think of ourselves as just being “us,” which leaves us stuck with whatever “us” we find ourselves in. So it’s good to see your sense of self as a fluid activity, and then ask yourself, “How can I mold it in a way that’s going to be helpful for long-term welfare and happiness?”

When you learn how to think in these terms: That’s what eventually will get you to the point where you don’t need a sense of self anymore. That’s when you’ll get to the ultimate level where you’ve found a happiness that doesn’t need to do anything or require anything more to be done. At that point, “self” will have no more value, and you can put both it and “not-self” aside.

But in the meantime learn a good sense of values around self and not-self as they apply to the path. Because having that sense of values will really help you on your way.

Chickens from Hell

September 17, 2016

We like to feed on our thoughts, which is why we feed them. We gain entertainment from them. We gain help with our occupation in life, especially if we're employed in a job that rewards thinking. So to keep the thoughts going, we just keep feeding, feeding, feeding them. But as the Buddha noted, our thoughts then turn around and feed on us. In his words, they actually chew on us. We think we're getting the better part of the deal: We feed them; they give us nourishment of one kind or another. We tend not to notice how much they're eating away at us, and that we're actually getting the worse part of the deal. We notice that we're being eaten away, but we don't make the connection as to what's eating away at us. Often the thoughts that we feed on cause us a lot of trouble. If we're not discerning, we just gobble down everything that the mind churns up—identifying it as “my thought” and thinking that “I've got to make something with it.” Sometimes we get totally chewed up by our thoughts, and yet then we turn around and keep feeding them some more.

It's as if we had some chickens. We feed them so that they give us eggs, but it turns out they don't produce only eggs. They also produce chicken shit, and we don't know which is which. So we just gobble down everything that comes out of the chickens—and of course we get sick. At the same time, it turns out that they're the chickens from hell. They come and peck at us when we're not aware of it, like the birds in the Hitchcock film. The problem is that we don't make the connection—the chickens pecking at us are the ones we're feeding—so we keep on feeding them.

One of the purposes of getting the mind into concentration is to step back from the whole process and learn to see it as it's happening. At the same time, we practice concentration to give the mind an alternative place to feed. Otherwise, we'll just keep feeding on whatever the chickens produce. When the Buddha provides analogies for different parts of the path, concentration is almost always the food. The first jhana is grass and water. The fourth jhana is ghee and honey and lots of other good things. We need this kind of food because if the mind doesn't have something good to feed on, it's going to feed on whatever it can get. As the Buddha said, if you don't have a pleasure that's apart from sensuality, then no matter how much you understand the drawbacks of sensuality, you're going to go back and

nibble on sensuality in secret. So try to develop a sense of ease and well-being with the breath as an alternative source of food.

We talked today about rapture. That's actually the food of the concentration when you're really hungry. The pleasure is the kind of food for when you're not quite so hungry. And equanimity is the feeling you have when everything is satisfied. The different parts of the body that have been lacking energy now have their energy supplied, so you don't have to keep gobbling things down.

So try to tune-in to a sense of well-being. Notice how you breathe and which parts of the body are especially sensitive to the breathing process. When you breathe in, what's the part that gets satisfied? What are the parts you're trying to satisfy as you breathe in? If you begin to notice that, then you can provide yourself with a sense of well-being very easily. Just go straight to those parts and then, when they're satisfied, try to notice the parts that are not so obvious but could use a dose of pleasure as well. It's as if you're sending food to different parts of the body. First you feed the ones that are clamoring the most. Then you try to spread the nourishment around to the quieter parts.

As you're doing this, thoughts will come up that are not related to the concentration. Remind yourself that it's inevitable they'll come up, but it's not inevitable that you run with them. Make the distinction between which part of the thinking process is old kamma and which is new.

The old kamma is the fact that you have these habits. You learned this language. You learned this way of talking to yourself, so it's only natural that the mind keeps churning out the same old stuff with its random word-generators and image-generators. But the question of whether to believe the thought, whether to run with it, whether to accept it: That's new kamma. So as soon as you're aware of the fact that you've started running with these thoughts, drop them. That's a skillful action right there. And no matter how many times it takes, it's a habit you've got to learn how to develop. Think about all the many lifetimes you've spent just learning how to think, learning how to master human language and enjoying the results, feeding off the results. Now you're going to learn a new habit—how not to run with a thought—and it's going to take time.

This is why patience is so important in the practice. This goes against the grain. We like to think. We like to talk to ourselves. That's one of the ways the mind feeds. Now we're giving it new feeding habits and, as always is the case with new habits, it takes a while to get used to them. So learn patience.

And learn how to keep encouraging yourself. Try to develop some of the

skills that are not taught in our educational system, which channels everybody into areas where they're talented. If you're not talented in pulling yourself out of your thoughts, especially if you've been talented about thinking, it's going to take a while to see that there's a talent in not thinking and to actually like it. This requires patience and a kind of bounce-back attitude that no matter how many times you have to keep dropping your thoughts, you don't give up. You just keep on dropping them and coming back to the breath.

As the mind gets a better and better sense of ease and well-being with the breath, it's going to be easier for you to pull yourself out of the thoughts. You begin to see that there are many stages in the formation of a thought—many stages in the new kamma that encourages a thought. The quicker you are at recognizing the fact that the mind has slipped off and you're able to drop it, then the more you're going to see. Instead of hitting the thought at stage five, you start hitting it at stage four, stage three, stage two, stage one: down to the point where it's just a little squirm of energy in the interface where the mind and the body meet. And that squirm of energy: It's hard to say whether it's physical or mental. But if you slap the perception on and say, "Oh, this is a thought and it's a thought about the future; it's a thought about the past; it's a thought about this topic, that topic," then you run with it.

In the very beginning stages, you're going to be aware of the thought only when it's fully formed. But as you get better and better at zapping it in time, catching it when it's just a squirm of energy or a little stirring of energy, then the more clearly you see the different stages. It's like a product being sent through the bureaucracy. The bureaucrat on this level puts a stamp on it; sends it to the next level. The next one puts a stamp on it and sends it up.

If you can catch it the moment the product first appears, then you have a lot more control over what's going on. This applies not only to idle thoughts, but also to strong emotions. The problem with strong emotions is that they take hold of the breath and zip right through the stages very quickly. You have to work on taking this process apart while you're meditating, but be alert to the fact that it's happening all day long.

And especially with a strong emotion that you don't like: There's going to be a lot of denial around it. In other words, the first bureaucrat will put the stamp on and then pretend it didn't happen. It's like kids passing a note through a classroom. Pass it on to the next person and then pretend you didn't do it. Pass it on to the next person; pretend you didn't do it.

As long as you're willing to play along with the pretense, you're going to be stuck with fully-formed thoughts, fully-formed emotions, which you try to feed on as they chew you up. But if you can begin to sense the points in the process where this decision or that decision has been made, you can nip it in the bud. Then it's a lot easier to deal with.

But all this requires that you have an alternative source of food. Feed off the directed thought and evaluation. Get interested in the issues of the breath: How do you make the breath energy really good? And what is the breath energy, anyhow? How do you sense when it's flowing well and when it's not flowing well? What ways of dealing with the breath improve your health? What ways wear you down? These are things that you can study, that are worth studying, because the breath can be medicine for the diseases of the body and the mind. It can help bring balance to a body that's out of balance or to a mind that's out of balance, because it's good nourishing food, a lot better than the chicken shit that we've been feeding off of for so long.

So meditation is a matter of learning new feeding habits, habits that will be really good for you. And as for the chickens, you can let them starve. It's not that you won't be thinking anymore, but you realize that you've been feeding way too many chickens. At the same time, you get more and more discerning about which chickens are the ones that are actually feeding on you. Those you can stop feeding. At the same time, you also get more discerning about what's the chicken shit and what are the chicken eggs, so that when you have to think, you're eating only eggs.

As you get really good at the meditation, you don't have to eat those either. They're still there—awakening doesn't mean that you don't think anymore—but you find that you can do a lot of things with the eggs besides just eating them. You can fix food for other people. Meanwhile, you've got the food of your concentration. You've got the food that comes from getting the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being, feeding all the parts of the body that need breath energy each time you breathe in, and learning how to let that sense of being nourished spread out so that it seems to fill every cell in the body. That pulls you out of the vicious cycle of feeding the chickens and then having them come back to peck your eyes out at night.

Ultimately, as the Buddha said, there comes a point where the mind doesn't have to feed anymore at all. The well-being of awakening, the well-being of release is totally free from any need to depend on conditions. It's described as a state that's free from hunger, not because you've told yourself not to be hungry, but because you've fully satisfied the mind.

So that's where we're aiming. And we start by learning new feeding

habits. They'll get you on the healthy path.

Train Your Hunger (The Sea Squirt)

November 11, 2016

There's a little animal called the sea squirt. It's not very big, and its most complex organs are its brain and its digestive system. After it's born, it moves around in the ocean and finds a spot that it likes, where it senses that the food will be good. Then it stays there for the rest of its life. And one of the first things it does after it's found its spot is to digest its brain, so it's just left with a digestive system, basically to show who's in charge.

This is true not just for sea squirts. They've shown that when the brain makes its map of reality, a lot of the information—in fact the first order of information—comes in from the digestive tract. All the signals about what you're hungry for, what you lack, drive you as you look to the world outside. A large portion of your map of reality is devoted to what's needed inside, in your gut, in your stomach. And you go out looking.

This fits in with the Buddha's teachings on the fact that what defines us as beings is our need to subsist on food. We're constantly looking for the next meal. It's good to keep this point in mind. It's often forgotten.

I've been reading some books on the noble eightfold path, and the general message they give is that we suffer because we have the wrong map of reality: that inside we believe there's a permanent self, and outside we believe that there's a permanent happiness. And because of that wrong map, we make a lot of wrong decisions. We react to the world in the wrong way. So the solution they propose is to see, on the one hand, that there is no self, or no permanent self inside, and that outside nothing is permanent. As a result, you see that there's nothing worth going after, so you just give up, happy to be free from making any effort for any purpose.

And that's supposed to be wisdom. You basically take an equanimous attitude toward things as they arise and pass away, knowing that ultimately everything's going to pass away, and that's it. Well, to give up feeding on the world out there simply because there's no permanent self, or because nothing out there is permanent, is like saying you're going to stop feeding on food because you realize that your stomach is impermanent and food is impermanent.

That's not going to work. Our hunger drives us. As the Buddha said, it's our primary disease. If we can't get the food we want, well, we'll settle for

something else. You see this with the coyotes. You look into their scat and sometimes you find plastic rope. They couldn't get the food they wanted but they found something to stuff into their stomachs. And as long as our hunger is driving us, we're going to keep looking for food, even if it has to be plastic rope.

So the solution doesn't lie simply in changing your map of the world outside or the world inside, to see that there's no permanent entity either inside or out—because that, of course, doesn't take into account the fact that your inside map is not telling you about permanent entities. It's telling you about hunger. And we don't hunger for food because we think we have a permanent self or that there's permanent food. We hunger for food, both physical and mental, because of our hunger pains.

Our reaction to those pains is what we've got to train: We've got to train our hunger to be more discerning as to what's worth going after. We train it through virtue, concentration, and discernment. This will take time. It's like trying to wean yourself off of sugar: It takes a while to grow used to not constantly getting, or going for, the quick hit of sugar. But once you've managed to stay away from it for a while, then you begin to realize that if you go back to eating sugar, it doesn't feel right anymore. It smells funny, tastes funny. It doesn't feel right inside you.

In other words, you have to learn how to abstain for a while. And you abstain largely out of confidence that this is going to be good for you. But you also need some substitutes for the things you're abstaining from. The substitutes may actually be better for you, but it'll take a while to get used to them.

It's the same with the precepts. We abstain from behavior that we might have felt like doing. Before, if we found pests in the house, we'd think it convenient to just kill them. Or to avoid awkward situations, we'd think it okay to tell little white lies. That kind of thing. But now we realize that we've got to abstain from these things 100%. There may be difficulties, but after a while we get used to the difficulties, and we actually find that we feel better. There's a greater sense of satisfaction that comes from holding to the precepts. And then when you see people engaging in little white lies, it really hits you hard, like the smell of sugar if you've been away from sugar for a while. You realize how unhealthy it is.

The same with all the other little things that would go against the precepts: If you're able to abstain from them, you train your hunger in new directions. Rather than feeding off the advantage of breaking the precepts, you feed off the sense of self-esteem, the sense of well-being, the sense of

harmlessness that comes from following the precepts.

Even more so with concentration: You're totally retraining your hunger. You're finding that there is a sense of well-being that can come simply from sitting here focusing on the breath, allowing the breath to get comfortable, allowing that sense of ease and well-being to spread through the body. As you get more skilled at it, you find that you can tap into it whenever you need it.

Then you can turn around and look at the food that you got, say, from sensual desire or ill will, or any of the hindrances—restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty, sleepiness. All the hindrances are a kind of food, but they're bad food. Junk food. Now that you see you've got a better source of food, a greater sense of well-being, you get more picky about your search for pleasure, your search for happiness, the things you want to feed off of. Remember that, as the Buddha said, we suffer in clinging, and the clinging is another word for taking sustenance. It's another word for feeding.

As for discernment, the Buddha says there are five things that you need to know if you want to discern the escape from this feeding cycle. Even though there may be some satisfaction in getting certain hungers satisfied, with a lot of them you realize that the effort that goes into them and the costs they entail are not worth it. And that's what discernment is all about: learning how to let go by passing judgment on which ways of feeding are worth the effort and which are not. After you've fed the mind well on concentration, you begin to look at all the other things that would pull you out of concentration, and you see that there's greed or aversion or delusion involved in going after those things. So, to get past them, the first step is to see, when the greed or the anger comes, how does it come? What's its origination? What's causing it? Then the second step is to see, when it goes away, how does it go away? But you don't just stop there though, just watching it coming and going away.

Once you see the cause, the third step is to ask yourself, "Why do you go for that? What's the allure? What's the flavor? What's the sense of being fed that you get off of that?" And then the fourth step is to compare the allure with the drawbacks. "If you feed off this, what are the long-term consequences?" It's a lot easier to see this in all fairness when you've fed the mind well with concentration, because otherwise it's going to go for whatever hit it can find. And it's going to lie to itself about what the allure actually is. But when the mind is still, you're more likely to see the real allure; when it's well fed, you can see that the allure is very meager compared to the drawbacks. That's when you can drop it. You develop

dispassion for it, which is the fifth step: the escape.

And in addition to dispassion, you develop disenchantment, *nibbida*, which means the sense of having had enough of a certain food and not wanting it anymore. That combination of disenchantment and dispassion, that's the escape.

And when you can apply this analysis in an all-around way, eventually even to your concentration, you're not escaping just to equanimity. You really escape from all the ways you've fed, even on equanimity. The mind opens to another dimension where there's no hunger, where there's happiness, a sense of well-being that doesn't require that you feed.

So you don't overcome your hunger for things simply by denying it. You find something better to feed on. But you have to train the hunger to appreciate that, because without the training in virtue, concentration, and discernment, the mind won't appreciate it at all. It's got to be put into a position where it can see the drawbacks of its old ways of feeding, and realize that there's something better.

So the way to let go is not to just deny your hunger, it's to train your hunger to make it more discerning, to ask yourself deep down inside, "What do you really want out of life? What would really be satisfying?" And notice how the answer to that question is going to change as you develop more virtue, concentration, and discernment, as your hunger gets trained to the point where it's no longer needed.

So instead of digesting your brain, you get your intelligence to take over until it puts an end to your need for a digestive system. You find a happiness that's totally free from hunger, free from the need to feed, and that's when you let everything go—not out of defeat, out of victory.

That attitude of giving up on consuming the world because you say, "Well, it's not permanent, and I'm not permanent, so I might as well give up looking for happiness": That's basically saying that there's no true happiness to be found through fabricated things, so just give up on the whole idea of happiness and just be equanimous. That's defeat.

As the Buddha said, though, one of the names for the noble eightfold path is unexcelled victory in battle. You battle the ignorance that's been guiding your hunger, and you come out with something much better. You've learned that you can use the processes of fabrication to create a path that leads to something unfabricated. And that's genuine victory. We struggle in the world because of our hunger, but when we find something that doesn't require feeding and totally satisfies the hunger, then there's no more need to struggle. As the Buddha said, better than victory over thousands of other

people is victory over yourself—and this is how the victory is won.

The Whole Elephant

February 16, 2016

You probably know the story of the blind people and the elephant. A king gets his men to gather up the blind people in the city and then says, “Okay, show them an elephant.” So some of the blind people touch the elephant’s legs. Some touch his trunk. Some touch his tusks. Some touch his body. Some touch his tail. And depending on what they touched, they come to a conclusion about what an elephant is like. Some say the elephant’s like a post. Or the elephant’s like a granary, like a winnowing basket, like the pole of a plow. My favorite comparison comes from the ones who touch the tail and say, “The elephant is like a broom.” And then the blind people start fighting one another over whose image of the elephant is right, saying, “It’s like this. It’s not like that.” The creepy part of the story, of course, is that the king did this for his entertainment and he’s gratified by the sight of the blind people fighting.

What’s even creepier, though, is that there’s another version of the story in the Chinese Canon—the same story, but interpreted differently. In the Pali Canon, the blind people represent non-Buddhist sectarians. They don’t know the Dhamma and so they fight over the Dhamma because they don’t really know it. In the Chinese version, though, the blind people stand for all people, Buddhist or not, basically saying that even Buddhists are blind. There’s nobody who can really know the Dhamma. All we know is winnowing baskets, brooms, granaries, and posts. We don’t really know the elephant—and what’s more, it’s impossible for us to know the elephant. So we shouldn’t fight over our interpretations. Instead, we should just accept that some people see the elephant as a winnowing basket, so they have to content themselves with a winnowing basket, while you have to content yourself with your broom or your granary or whatever.

And this version of the story is not just in the Chinese Canon. It’s still told to this day in all kinds of Buddhist sects. It’s a really destructive take on the story because the implication is that nobody can ever know the Dhamma. It’s too big. And the other implication, of course, is that you might as well stop trying to figure out which version of the Dhamma is right.

It is true that there’s an awful lot in the Buddha’s awakening, much more than we can fathom. As he said, it’s like a forest full of leaves, whereas what

he taught was just a handful of leaves. But it is a handful. It's not too much to grasp. The handful contains everything important to know.

And it's something we can get not only our hands but also our heads around: the four noble truths. That's not all that much to comprehend. To paraphrase Ajaan Lee, "There are people out there who can manage orchards of thousands of acres, and here we have just four noble truths, or four jhanas, and we can't get them straight. It's kind of embarrassing"—the implication being, of course, that there's not all that much we have to master, so we should be able to master it.

And we don't have to spend our whole lives always being blind. After all, the Buddha was One with Eyes, the All-around Eye, and one of his images for his act of teaching the path is that he's a doctor who can cure people of their blindness. You probably know that story as well. There's a blind man and someone gives him a cloth. It's a dirty old rag, but the person giving him the cloth says, "Here's a nice white piece of cloth. It looks really good on you." So the blind man takes good care of the dirty old rag, thinking it's a nice white piece of cloth. But then his friends and relatives take him to a doctor who can cure him of his blindness. As he gets his sight back, he looks at the cloth. He sees that it's a dirty old rag. What he thought was valuable was not.

The gaining of sight, of course, is the gaining of the Dhamma eye, when you see that there is really something deathless; and it can be obtained through the path.

So we're here to get over our blindness. And we have to take as our encouragement the principle that it is possible to get over our blindness. Don't listen to the people who say you can't.

Just this evening, a magazine arrived in which someone was writing about how when he started on the Buddha's path, he was hoping for enlightenment, but what he got instead was awakening to the fact that there really is nothing to know. You should satisfy yourself with this state of not knowing, he said. That, again, is a destructive way of thinking. There is something to know. And when you know it, it makes a huge difference. To begin with, it confirms the fact that your actions really do make a difference in your life. You know that if you hadn't acted on the path, you wouldn't have reached the deathless. You wouldn't have seen the deathless.

And you also see, in stepping out of space and time, just how long this process of suffering has gone on. That gives you all the more encouragement to do what you can to get past it, to complete the practice, even though you realize that in gaining this vision you've already cut off a lot

of the suffering you would have had to go through if you hadn't gained this vision, this eye, this sight. But still, you gain a glimpse of what it's like to be totally free of suffering. Just the act of being in the six senses, being immersed in the world of the space and time in the six senses: There's a lot of suffering there. That's what motivates you to get rid of the suffering still remaining.

So take heart in the fact that, however blind you may feel around the path, blindness can be cured. This is what the noble eightfold path is all about. If you develop right view all the way through right concentration, these qualities enable you to see more clearly. And here, again, think about that interpretation of the story of the elephant. If you say that everybody's blind and they have to content themselves with winnowing baskets and brooms and whatnot, there seems to be no right or wrong. But right view really differs from wrong view, and it's right because it works. It really does form a part of the path to the deathless that takes you out of your blindness. Right resolve is right because it works—and so on down all the factors of the path. That's why the Buddha included it in his handful of leaves—and why he would have distinguished the leaves in his hand from the dirt he left on the ground.

The more mindful you are when you've learned a lesson that helps you to see more clearly, the more concentrated the mind, the more still you are, then the more you can see what's going on inside. And even before you hit the deathless, you're able to see parts of your mind that were hidden in blind spots up to that point.

So we're here to see and to develop the qualities of mind that enable us to see: the right view that has us look at the right spot; the right effort that helps to clear away the things that get in the way of our seeing; and the right concentration that gives us an all-around vision. We get the mind centered and, once it's properly centered, it can look around itself—because you not only see the object that you're focused on when you concentrate, but you also begin to see the activities of the mind as they relate to the object. That's what you want to see.

You want to see what you're doing. This is the big blind spot in our lives—and it's very ironic. It's right close to us—what we're doing, our intentions for why we're doing things—so you'd think we would see these things clearly. But we have a tendency to hide them from ourselves, or just to get interested in other things, farther away—so much so that we don't see what we're doing.

When we practice, we're turning the spotlight on the right spot: What

are you doing right now? What's the intention behind it? How are you doing it? How skillfully are you doing it? To what extent are you giving rise to stress, pain, dis-ease, or disturbance by what you're doing? And how can you get the mind more still to step back from those activities? See which actions are unskillful so that you can drop them. See which ones are skillful so you that can keep doing and developing them until they've done the work.

As we keep following this path, the Buddha said, eventually it will take us to a place that we haven't seen before—to see the as-yet-unseen. It's unseen not because it's unseeable, but simply because we haven't looked in the right place. We haven't looked properly. We don't have the right vision yet, the right capacity to see it. But that's something that can be developed, because someday we really will see the whole elephant, and we can throw away our concepts of winnowing baskets, granaries, and brooms.

Of course, it's not just a matter of seeing. The Buddha also gives us ways of checking our seeing. You know the story, too, of the elephant hunter looking for a bull elephant in the forest. He sees the tracks of an elephant, but he doesn't immediately jump to the conclusion that this has got to be a bull elephant. But still, the tracks look likely, so he follows them. He sees scratch marks in the trees, but again he doesn't jump to the conclusion that this has to be a bull elephant. He's looking for a bull elephant because he needs one to do some heavy work. When he saw the footprints, he knew that they might come from dwarf females with big feet. He sees the scratch marks: These might come from tall females with tusks. Only when he actually sees the elephant does he know that he's got the bull elephant he wants.

The footprints and the scratch marks stand for the various stages on the path: the development of concentration, the development of some of the psychic powers that come from concentration. But the vision of the deathless: That's the whole elephant. And it's something human beings can see.

I was talking with a scholar recently who was saying that he didn't think that any conditioned human being could see the deathless. As far as he was concerned, all human beings were conditioned beings, so how could a conditioned being see anything unconditioned?

But he was thinking backwards. The Buddha's approach wasn't to define what a human being is and then, from that definition, to decide what human beings can and can't know. Instead, he looked at what human beings can do and what they can know as the result of their actions. And looking this way took him to a place that really was unconditioned. That's when he realized

that defining yourself as being this, that, or the other thing is placing a limitation on yourself. This ranges from anything as simple as the idea that: “I am innately good,” or “I am innately bad,” up to whatever “I am” you might choose. If you’re going to choose a provisional “I am,” choose an “I am” that says, “I am capable of changing the way I act and of finding awakening.” That one will get you through. And you know that you have the capacity to see the whole elephant when the whole elephant appears. That’s the proof that you don’t always have to be blind.

Fire Escapes

April 7, 2016

A rainy night like this forces your attention inside. If you send your mind out, you run into the rain and the cold, so you bring it back in. Try to inhabit your body fully. Think of your awareness as having a shape like the body and that it fills every part of your physical body. You're aware in your toes, you're aware in your legs, you're aware in your hips, torso, your head, your arms, everything. You fully inhabit this space.

And how do you know this space? You know it through the breath energy. There's the in-and-out breath but then there are also the more subtle energies that flow throughout the body, throughout the nerves and the blood vessels, out to every pore. See how fully you can inhabit the space defined by the breath. Back into it. Feel it all around you.

This helps to pull you away from your concerns about things outside: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. If you can inhabit this space with a sense of well-being, you ask yourself: Why go out?

The mind may come up with its reasons. But when you examine those reasons, you see that a lot of them have little real substance. They may be convincing if you glance at them—and this is how you often fall for a lot of things happening in the mind: A glancing idea comes in and then it's gone. You pick up something out of it, something that has you intrigued, and you wonder what you missed. The thought seems more impressive and more convincing than it would if you were able to look at it full on.

So, try to be full on with your body right now. You realize that if there's going to be any happiness, any really solid happiness, you've got to find it in here. As the Buddha said, the problem of suffering is here. But the solution is also here. The end is here.

Someone once asked him about how big the universe was. And the Buddha replied that you could spend your whole life—even if you had an amazing ability to stride great strides—you could go for a hundred years, and you'd still never get to the end of the universe. You would die first. But the end of the universe, in terms of the suffering of the universes of all your becomings, he says, can be found in here. You don't have to go out there.

So, stay in here. Get to know this space really fully. The end of suffering is to be found in this fathom-long body. That doesn't mean that it's going to

be found in your liver or stomach. It means that your awareness right here, your awareness that fills the body right here, is where there will be an opening to something that's beyond the universe.

This explains one of the ironies of the practice: We're told that the body is on fire with aging, illness, and death, and yet this is where we're told to center ourselves. You might think that if you could somehow get out of the body, that would be the end, but it's not. You'd become a wandering spirit. But if you stay right here where this awareness is, things will begin to open up.

This is where the fire escape is. In fact, what we're doing right now as we're practicing right concentration is learning about this fire escape.

One of the terms for right concentration is "jhana," which is related to the verb *jhayati*, which means to be absorbed but also means to burn with a steady flame, like the flame of an oil lantern.

When you think of the fire of your senses—the fires in the eyes, in the ears, in the nose, in the tongue, in the body as they engage with the outside world—there's a different verb for that kind of burning. It's the burning of a wood fire, where the flames leap up and lick out and flicker all over the place. As they leap around, they cast strange shadows on the wall. They create all kinds of misunderstandings at the same time that they're burning, burning, burning away. Whereas if you have the light of an oil lantern or an oil lamp, the flame is steady. And when the flame is steady, you see things clearly. You can even read by it.

So try to make your mind steady right here. Turn the fire of the senses from a flickering fire into a clear, steady one. Find a spot in the body where it feels good, where the breath energy feels nourishing: calming when you need to be calmed, energizing when you need to be energized. Get a sense that the energy is as still as possible, your mind is as still as possible, and that's when you can read things clearly inside.

In particular, you start reading the instructions for the fire escape. Some of those instructions come in what the Buddha taught, but often the instructions are right here. All you have to do is to apply what the Buddha calls appropriate attention. You're looking for where there's stress—and particularly where the stress comes and goes—and asking yourself, "What am I doing at the same time that the stress comes? What I am doing at the same time that it goes?"

You begin to notice that there are certain actions in the mind even as the mind is getting still. In fact, it's because the mind is getting still that you can see these subtle actions more clearly. The majority of the mind is still, but

there'll be a little flickering here and there. And you want to notice to what extent that flickering is related to the stress coming and going. If you see that the flickering and the stress come and go at the same time, then you look further. What is that? What did the mind do just then? What kind of perception appeared? What kind of thought appeared? What kind of intention? Where was it going? And what can you do to let go of it?

Now, there are two ways of letting go. One is letting go for the time being, and the other is a letting go that goes deeper. For that deeper letting go, you have to start looking more carefully at what the allure of the perceptions is. Why do you want to get engaged in them? Then, when you see the allure, you can also start looking at the drawbacks. Given that the perception adds to the level of stress in the mind, is it worth going with?

When you can contemplate this in a way that allows you to see that the allure is not worth it, that's when you gain the escape: first from the flickering flames, and then from the steady flame of jhana itself.

So there's a map right there: right in your own mind. Of course your directions for how to read the map come from what you've learned about what the Buddha had to say.

In fact this is a common image throughout the texts: that the Buddha's giving us escape instructions. There's a sutta where a man comes to see Ven. Ananda and asks for a door to the deathless, "Where do you find the door to the deathless?" And Ananda starts giving him a list, citing the different levels of right concentration: the four jhanas, the four brahma-viharas, and three of the formless states. Then he explains how to analyze each of these states so that you can go beyond even the steady flame of concentration, to an experience of the deathless: the going-out of the flames. So the man ends up with eleven doors, which he compares to eleven escapes from a burning house.

There's some overlap in the list. The four brahma-viharas are another way of getting the mind into jhana, because even with them, you have to practice developing concentration with directed thought and evaluation, without directed thought and evaluation, with a sense of pleasure, with a sense of rapture, with a sense of equanimity. In other words, you take these attitudes through the jhanas. The three formless attainments—infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness—build on the fourth jhana. Even though they're formless, they're all right here. Where do you experience them? You experience them right where you're experiencing the body right now.

See that the breath gets really, really refined. Your mind gets very still,

and all the energy channels in the body get connected up so that there's less and less of a need to breathe air in from the outside. Whatever oxygen exchange needs to happen will happen at the skin. And when your mind is really still, the brain isn't using that much oxygen, so you don't feel a need to breathe at all. It's not that you're trying to stifle the breath or stop it. It just falls silent on its own as things get connected up.

As you can maintain that state and stay balanced there, you begin to notice that your sense of the edge of the body—where the body ends and outside space begins—begins to dissolve. You realize that, with the movement of the breath still, the only thing holding your sense of the shape of the body is just a perception. If you can drop that perception of the form and stay right here—you don't go anywhere else—you begin to sense the body as a mist, as a cloud of little sensation drops. Then you see that it's easier to focus, or more quiet to focus, on the space between the drops. And then you sense that there's no limit to that. That's what they mean by infinite space. It's not that you go out and check the edge of how far it goes out toward infinity, but simply that you don't sense any limit to it.

So it's all right here. And this, too, is one of the fire escapes, because this, too, you can analyze to see what perceptions in this state still disturb the mind. What's their allure? How can you let that allure go by comparing it to the drawbacks?

We're finding a fire escape here in the midst of the fire. You don't have to look anywhere else. As for all the Dhamma teachings that have nothing to do with the fire escape, you can just let them go.

I was given a lecture a while back by someone who was quoting an academic, saying that to teach that there's a right Dhamma and a wrong Dhamma is a very dangerous thing. The analogy the person gave was that the Dhamma's like a map. Everybody's Dhamma is like a different map. And as we all know, all maps distort reality to one extent or another, so there's no one true map, no one map that corresponds to all of reality. We have to accept the fact that everybody's map is full of distortions, and no one's is really right.

But that's a false analogy. What the Buddha's giving is instructions on how to find the fire escape. You can go anywhere in the world, any hotel in the world, and the maps to the fire escapes are all the same. Regardless of the culture, regardless of how fancy or unfancy the hotel: It's all the same sort of information. And the maps all serve the same purpose. They don't have to tell you how the hotel was built or what's in the walls or what's in the foundations. All they have to tell you is where you go to get out. That type of

information is all very standard, and it's presented in a simple, standard way so that it's useful when you really need it. The maps tell you just the information you need to know for that one purpose, and that's all.

And there can be good and bad maps, right and wrong maps, to the fire escape. Some diagrams could put you in a dead-end corner where you'd be consumed by flames or asphyxiated by the smoke. Others take you to a door where, when you open the door, it drops for fifty feet. So you want to avoid those maps. But other maps effectively show you the way to safety. Those maps are right for their purpose.

What we've got here is the map of the noble eightfold path, the map about right concentration and its seven supports, its seven requisites. In addition, there are instructions on how to use right concentration, how to analyze what's going on in the concentration, so that we can begin to understand how the mind puts suffering together and how we can start taking it apart.

That's the map to the fire escape. That's how you get out of the fire. That's all you need from the map.

So it's all right here. And there's a right way and a wrong way of trying to get out of right here. One very wrong way is to tell yourself, "I'm going to stay here forever, so learn to see that the flames are beautiful." If you believe that, you're going to get engulfed.

So realize that we're in a burning building—this house of the body we have here, these burning senses. But the escape lies within. It lies in learning how to separate things out. You have the body here, you've got the breath here, but also the awareness here. And for a long time during the practice of concentration, it's going to seem like they're one. But as you begin to see that your sense of the body is something you've put together out of different sensations—and you don't have to keep doing that—that allows you to maintain the awareness right here without feeling confined by the body. And then you can analyze the feeling of space, or your perception of space, so that you're not confined by anything at all, not even the perceptions that hold you in concentration.

So everything you need is right here. The escape is right here. But to find the escape, you also have to understand what you're doing that keeps setting fire to the mind, and to learn how to stop that. And there's a right way and a wrong way of doing that.

This is why, when you gain instructions in the Dhamma, you look at the people who are giving the instructions. When scholars say that there's no right or wrong Dhamma, you look at how well they are practicing. They're

just reading the books. And for them, reading the books is enough. That's a sign of something really wrong right there. It's as if they didn't have the problem of suffering, or that they don't recognize they have the problem of suffering, or that they don't take any interest in the idea that maybe there could be an end to this, even though that's what the best texts are all talking about. Are those the kind of people you want to follow?

You look at the ajaans. They might not have the degrees, they may not be as widely read, but they take the Buddha seriously: that suffering is a big problem but there's a way out. That's what the four noble truths are all about. They're not just four interesting statements about suffering. They're an announcement that this is the big problem in life and here's the solution.

So it's up to you how much you want to benefit from that teaching, how much you want to benefit from that announcement. But if you are looking for an escape, this is where you're going to find it.

Passion, Dispassion, Compassion

January 15, 2010

There's a Pali term, raga, which is usually translated as passion. And there's its opposite, viraga, or dispassion. There are areas in which raga or passion is a good thing. Passion for the Dhamma is a good thing. The desire to practice, the desire to attain the results of the practice: having a passion for these things is something the Buddha actually encouraged.

But otherwise, raga is something you've got to watch out for, because it's a major cause of suffering. That means that an important stage of the practice, an important attainment, is the ability to develop viraga.

First, there's dispassion for sensual desires. We're more in love with our sensual desires than we are with the actual pleasures. The pleasures come and we're not satisfied. So we want more, and then we're obsessed with our desires for these things. You can elaborate your desires for sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, relationships, whatever, for days on end. Then the actual pleasure comes and it's not really all that much. Yet when the Buddha points this fact out, everybody says, "Oh, you're just bad-mouthing the pleasure." But when you look at it, there's really not that much there.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a dog chewing on a bone and getting nothing but its saliva, and yet it's obsessed with its saliva, drinking down the saliva, thinking that it's getting food.

Then there's dispassion for form and for formlessness. In other words, once you've mastered jhana, then you develop dispassion for it. It sounds kind of sad, doesn't it? You master it and then you're no longer obsessed with it. You have to go beyond it. People don't like to hear that, or think about the implications of dispassion. It sounds like we're trying to become numb, indifferent, without energy—as if passion were the only energy that we have to keep us going. Well, in some ways, yes, it is. The fact that we keep going after things, the energy we put into fabricating things, is what keeps the whole process of fabrication going, along with all the stress that comes with fabrication. Yet this sort of passion is something that society encourages. We're happy to play along and don't like to think that we're misguided. So we tend to paint a picture that dispassion must be some horrible gray state.

But as the Buddha said, dispassion is the highest dhamma, the highest phenomenon, and leads to the ultimate happiness, the ultimate clarity of mind, the ultimate unconditioned happiness, where you don't have to keep creating things. You don't have to keep salivating all the time. You've actually got something that's really fulfilling. But to get there requires that you abandon your taste for all the other things that get in the way.

Most of us practice with the idea we'd like to collect new pleasures to add to our store, and meditation is simply another pleasure to throw in with the other ones. We'd like to have our cake and eat it, too—and have a few more cakes put aside, ready to consume as a midnight snack. But the extent to which we keep pursuing other things gets in the way of our pursuit of true happiness. You've got to look at it that way.

And the passion that keeps us creating these other forms of pleasure that then let us down: You've really got to realize that it's not all that fulfilling.

This requires a real shift in our orientation, because we do identify ourselves around the pleasures that we look for, the pleasures in sensuality. You identify yourself as a person who likes this particular sensual pleasure, that particular sexual orientation, this type of food, that type of music. A huge amount of our identity is mis-centered there. And it's difficult to step back and look at our identity as something to let go of because we feel that if we don't have that identity, we're nothing—regardless of how much the Buddha says that to let go of that particular identity is no great loss.

He goes even deeper into our ideas. It's interesting that in the pattern of the different levels of passion that get abandoned, sensual passion goes first, and then it's passion for form and formlessness, which can include not only the states of jhana but also abstract ideas and ideals. He's asking us to step back from our identification with those as well. That's scary, too.

We feel that if we abandon our ideals, we're betraying them. But if we abandon passion for them, we aren't betraying them. It's still possible to act on compassion. It's still possible to act on empathetic joy, without passion.

You maintain these motivations because they're the right thing to do. You have compassion, and this is where English plays a trick on us. Compassion, in terms of its etymology, means you feel the same thing, or you feel with somebody else. When somebody is suffering, compassion of that sort is a painful emotion. You feel part of their pain as well. For most of us, we live in a state of obsession with our pleasures, so that only if we feel somebody else's pain will we turn from our pleasures and focus on helping them. But a mind free from passion doesn't need that pain in order to be helpful. You see that there's suffering and you want to help. That's it. You

don't have to feel pain along with the people. You just see that it's the right thing to do. The Buddha calls compassion of this sort an ornament of the mind—an ornament of the mind that's become cleansed of its passions.

So it's not that you become hard-hearted or unfeeling. It's simply that you don't need the same play of emotions, the same play of feelings, in order to get yourself to do the right thing.

As I said, when most people are passionate, passion for a particular pleasure, the only thing that will peel them away from that to notice other people is the pang that comes when you see that they're suffering. It hits you. It disturbs your pleasure, so you've got to do something to work on that in order to get back to your equilibrium, or to get back to the pleasure that you're fascinated with. That's normal motivation.

So when we hear of another kind of motivation, the motivation of an awakened mind, it seems strange and alien. But as the Buddha said, it's the most effective kind of compassion there is, where your mind is not pained. You're not trying to work off your pain in helping someone else. In other words, your identity doesn't get involved.

Ven. Ananda once made an observation related to this point. He was talking with Ven. Sariputta. Sariputta had been commenting on how he'd reflected one day in his meditation: Is there anyone whose death would affect his state of mind? And he realized there was no one. Ananda asked, "Well, what about the Buddha? You wouldn't get disturbed if the Buddha passed away?" And Sariputta replied, "I'd reflect that it's a sad thing that such a beneficial being has to pass, but then everybody has to pass." And Ananda made an interesting comment: "It's because of your lack of conceit that you wouldn't grieve over that, the loss of the Buddha."

A lot of our compassion is tied up in conceit. There has to be a feeling of pain, that it's your pain. Your sense of self gets involved in one way or another, in order to act in a compassionate way, in a helpful way.

We're so used to it that we don't notice it. And we also don't like the idea: that our compassion is selfish—which is another reason why we don't notice it. But it's there. And it's good to recognize that and good to realize that it would be beneficial for everybody involved if you could still be compassionate without that conceit, where your compassion is simply an ornament of the mind.

So thinking in these ways helps you to realize that some of the qualities we see as good in ourselves are not totally good, and that the admixture of passion actually creates problems. We're so used to having passion mixed up with everything good in our lives that we feel that a state of dispassion

would strip the mind of its goodness. So it's wise to stop and think. Actively use your imagination to think in these other terms, because the good done by a mind that doesn't need conceit in order to do that good contains a lot of genuine goodness. The compassion that comes from a mind that has found true happiness—total happiness, the happiness inside that doesn't have to depend on conditions—is a very different kind of compassion from the compassion that requires conceit.

So try to stretch your imagination every now and then. Look at the ways in which you feed on things to find your happiness. And learn to look at their drawbacks so that the possibility of a happiness that doesn't need to feed, that doesn't need to be driven by passion, becomes more and more attractive. This kind of thinking gives more and more motivation to the practice, so that someday you'll know what it's like to find the happiness that comes with dispassion.

Because you've opened your mind to the possibility that it could be a good thing.

Freedom, Conditioned & Not

June 11, 2015

There are only two teachings that the Buddha lists as categorical, meaning that they're true across the board in all situations for everyone. One is the four noble truths, and the other is the principle that skillful actions should be developed and unskillful ones should be abandoned. In fact, you can derive the four noble truths from that second categorical teaching. Craving should be abandoned; the path should be developed, so as to comprehend suffering and then attain its cessation. In that case, the craving is the unskillful action and the path is the skillful one.

There's another passage where one of the Buddha's lay followers is being accosted by some members of another sect. They ask him, "Does your teacher teach that the world is eternal or not?" — "No, neither one." "How about if it's finite or infinite?" — "No, he doesn't address that one, either." "How about if the soul is the same thing as the body or different?" — "Nope." "How about an arahant after death: Does he exist, not exist, both, neither?" — "The Buddha doesn't address any of those issues." So the people say, "Your teacher doesn't teach anything." Apparently, those were the hot issues of the day. But the Buddha's follower says, "No, there's one thing he does teach: He teaches that skillful actions should be developed and unskillful ones abandoned." That principle was the Buddha's central teaching. Afterward, the follower went to tell the Buddha about the conversation, and the Buddha affirmed what he had said.

So as we're sitting here meditating, it's important that we have a sense of what we're doing right now, whether it's skillful, whether it's not, realizing that we always have the choice: You can either abandon skillful actions or you can develop them; you can abandon unskillful ones or you can develop them. And the Buddha's recommendation, of course, is to develop the skillful ones and abandon the ones that aren't.

It's happened many times, though, that I've been teaching retreats—it happened here in the States and it happened recently in France—when the question gets posed: "This obsession with the minutiae of your little actions, isn't that getting in the way of realizing the Oneness that's around us all the time? Why don't we just let go of questions of right and wrong, and open to the Oneness?"

There is Oneness. The question, of course, is what kind of Oneness is that? It's an idea; it's a perception. And how reliable is that perception? You can apply the perception of Oneness to all kinds of things. But as the Buddha pointed out, even the highest state of Oneness of non-duality is fabricated. There's a state where there's the Oneness of consciousness, a sense of your awareness being one with the object. But that's fabricated and it's going to let you down.

Even more so when you just slap the label of Oneness on everything without really knowing what you're doing. After all, there is a choice—you can choose to use that label or not. And you have to ask yourself, "Why are you using that label? Is it skillful? What are you trying to avoid?" There are a lot of areas of life where dualities really do matter. When you're having your brain operated on, you want the surgeon to know which part of your brain is the left brain and which part is the right, which knife to pick up and which knife not to pick up.

And of course the issue of suffering places a lot of dualities on you right here and now. Suffering is different from not suffering; the cause of suffering is different from the cause of not suffering. Unless you're totally dead, you're going to prefer not suffering. So the fact of suffering forces dualities on us. And as the Buddha points out, it all comes down to our actions: Some actions lead to suffering, and some to its cessation. That's why he taught a path of action, and said that its factors are right.

There's something very unusual in the path, which is that it's based on the principle that your present experience is composed of the results of past actions, your current actions—i.e., your current intentions—and the results of current intentions, all brought together. Your present actions take the potentials from past actions and turn them into what you're experiencing right now—as when you're choosing to stay with the breath.

The fact that you've chosen to stay with the breath changes the breath right there. If you do it right, there's going to be a sense of ease that comes with the act of paying attention to the breath.

The important thing in all of this is that your current actions don't have to be influenced by your past ones. There is some freedom of choice here. How that happens, the Buddha doesn't explain; where it comes from, he doesn't explain. But if in practice you pursue this relative level of freedom you have right now—and follow it carefully enough and consistently enough—it will take you to a bigger kind of freedom, i.e., the freedom of the unconditioned.

So these little choices you're making here are not little. You're zeroing in

on something that's really important: this potential for freedom right here, right now, and how to make the most of it. Most people don't make the most of their freedom of choice. They just go along with old habits, put everything on automatic pilot, and direct their attention someplace else.

But if you want freedom, you have to turn around and look, "What are you choosing right now? Why are you choosing it? What do you expect the results will be?" This is the series of questions that the Buddha posed to his son. When the Buddha was teaching his son, he wasn't the kind of teacher who would give just elementary but not very insightful lessons to children. He wanted his son to start off on the right foot, right from the very beginning. So he focused on actions, your intentions. What do you expect to happen as the result of your actions? And then you check, while you're acting: Are you getting the results you expected? In other words, are they harmless? After acting: Did you actually get harmless results? If not, you can change. Keep circling around these choices you have right now, and your sensitivity as to what's skillful and what's not will develop.

For instance, when the Buddha himself was getting on the right path, he divided his thoughts into two kinds: thoughts imbued with sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness on one side; and those that were free of sensuality—in other words, dealing with renunciation—free from ill will, free from harmfulness on the other side. Then he watched his mind. When it was going to the harmful side, he kept it in check; when it was going to the more skillful side, he let it wander as it liked. He kept an eye on it, though, making sure that it didn't wander too far astray. But then he began to realize that you can think skillful thoughts all day long, and although there may not be any bad karmic consequences, it is tiring to the mind. So it's even more skillful to get the mind into concentration.

When you're in the various levels of concentration, getting the mind deeper and deeper into absorption, the level of skill becomes more refined. You begin to notice that certain perceptions weigh on the mind; even the perceptions that keep you in concentration can be a weight. You learn to let those go. And you get deeper and deeper into concentration. As with any skill, you learn to do it more and more efficiently—quicker at getting the mind to settle down, more efficient at getting it to stay there with a minimum amount of effort. But there's always going to be some effort in the concentration.

At this level, the Buddha doesn't call it stress or suffering, but there is a very subtle level of stress: He calls it disturbance. And so you circle around that: your choice to focus on one perception rather than another. There

comes a point, though, where it's not getting into deeper concentration, and you begin to realize that the fact that you're making a choice and that, no matter what the choice is going to be, it's going to involve stress of some kind, more or less refined. And if everything is in balance at that point, there comes an opening. You realize that there's another alternative, which is that you don't have to make a choice. And in not making the choice, you're freed from the present moment, because your present choices were what made the present moment. When you can drop them, that's how you reach the ultimate freedom, the unconditioned freedom.

So unconditioned freedom is found by focusing on the freedom we have to make choices here and now. We have some freedom in choosing our actions. We want to learn to be more and more sensitive, more and more skillful around that possibility. In this way, this conditioned freedom takes us, if we follow the noble eightfold path, to the unconditioned freedom.

One of the questions I was asked in France was whether the unconditioned freedom was what underlies conditioned freedom. And there the answer has to be, No. Unconditioned freedom doesn't cause anything; it's not a foundation or a ground for anything; it's not the source of anything. It's simply that the path takes you there—this path of focusing on the question of whether what you're going to do right now is skillful or not. That's what takes you to the threshold of that freedom.

One person kept pursuing this question again and again, and I finally found out why. He had been listening to a teacher from another tradition who had said that unconditioned freedom is the foundation for everything we do right now; it's where everything comes from and everything returns. And this person observed—quite rightly—that if everything comes from unconditioned freedom, then when you reach unconditioned freedom, what's to prevent you from coming back out again? Is there no once-and-for-all kind of freedom? If unconditioned freedom were the source of things, there would be no escape. There would be no final release from suffering.

But here, unconditioned freedom is not the cause of anything at all. It's totally separate from causes. You find it by exploring your present causes. But there is a leap. A disconnect. Still, pursuing this supposedly minor issue of the fact that you can choose to be skillful or not in your choices right now actually takes you to something really big: a freedom once and for all, which you can't find any other way. So make the most of the freedom you've got now, and it will take you to a freedom that's bigger than anything you can imagine.

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.

Asava: Effluent; fermentation. Four qualities—sensuality, views, becoming, and ignorance—that “flow out” of the mind and create the flood of the round of death and rebirth.

Asura: A member of a race of beings who, like the Titans in Greek literature, battled the devas for sovereignty in heaven and lost.

Avijja: Ignorance of the four noble truths and the skills associated with their duties. Sanskrit form: avidja.

Brahman: A member of the priestly caste in India.

Brahma-vihara: Sublime attitude of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity.

Buddho: A meditation word meaning “awake.”

Chedi: A spired monument to the Buddha.

Deva: Literally, “shining one.” An inhabitant of the terrestrial and heavenly realms higher than the human.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action. (2) A phenomenon in and of itself. (3) Mental quality. (4) Doctrine, teaching. (5) Nibbana (although there are passages in the Pali Canon describing nibbana as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: dharma.

Dhutanga: Ascetic practice. There are thirteen such practices listed in the Canon that monks—and lay people—can voluntarily take on to polish away their defilements around food, clothing, and shelter.

Dukkha: Stress; pain; suffering.

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.

Luang Pu (Thai): Venerable Grandfather. A term of respect for a very senior and elderly monk.

Metta: Goodwill; benevolence. See brahma-vihara.

Naga: (1) A serpent with magical powers. (2) (Thai) A candidate for the monkhood. The Vinaya tells of a naga (1) who wanted to become a monk, but whose request was denied by the Buddha. In a Thai version of the story, the naga asked, as a boon, that all subsequent human candidates for the monkhood be called “naga” for the duration of their candidacy.

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.

Sala: Meeting hall.

Samsara: The wandering-on through rebirth and redeath.

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.

Somdet (Thai): A royal rank given by the king to monks at the top level of the Thai ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: sutra.

Upasika: A female lay-follower of the Buddha.

Vijja: (1) Clear knowing; skill. (2) Mastery of the skills associated with the four noble truths.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline.

Wat (Thai): Monastery.

Table of Contents

Titlepage	2
Copyright	3
Introduction	4
Free to Choose	6
What We Have in Common	10
For Your Benefit Here & Now	15
In Alignment	21
In the Present	24
Remember This	29
The Governing Principle	34
The Easy Way Out	38
The Sport of Wise People	42
The Thread of Mindfulness	50
Imperturbable	54
Scramble the Image	58
Dethinking Thinking	61
Training Your Cynical Voices	66
Boring	71
Your Intentions Come First	76
Questioning Your Unconscious Actions	79
Protection Through Mindfulness Practice	84
Recollection of the Buddha	90
Pleasant Practice, Painful Practice	98

Goodwill as Restraint	102
Cultivate a Limitless Heart	107
The Meaning of Happiness	111
Examine Your Happiness	116
Don't Underestimate Merit	121
Dedicating Merit	126
Harmlessness	131
The Samsaric Mud Fight	135
Justice vs. Skillfulness	139
Inner Refuge Through Inner Strength	145
Living Honorably	150
So Little Time	154
The Positive Side of Heedfulness	158
A True Person	162
Adult Dhamma	166
Clinging, Addictions, Obsessions	170
A Noble Warrior's Path	175
Comparing Mind	180
Intelligent about Change	184
Right View about Right View	190
Not-self Is a Value Judgment	195
Chickens from Hell	199
Train Your Hunger (The Sea Squirt)	204
The Whole Elephant	209
Fire Escapes	214

Passion, Dispassion, Compassion	220
Freedom, Conditioned & Not	224
Glossary	229