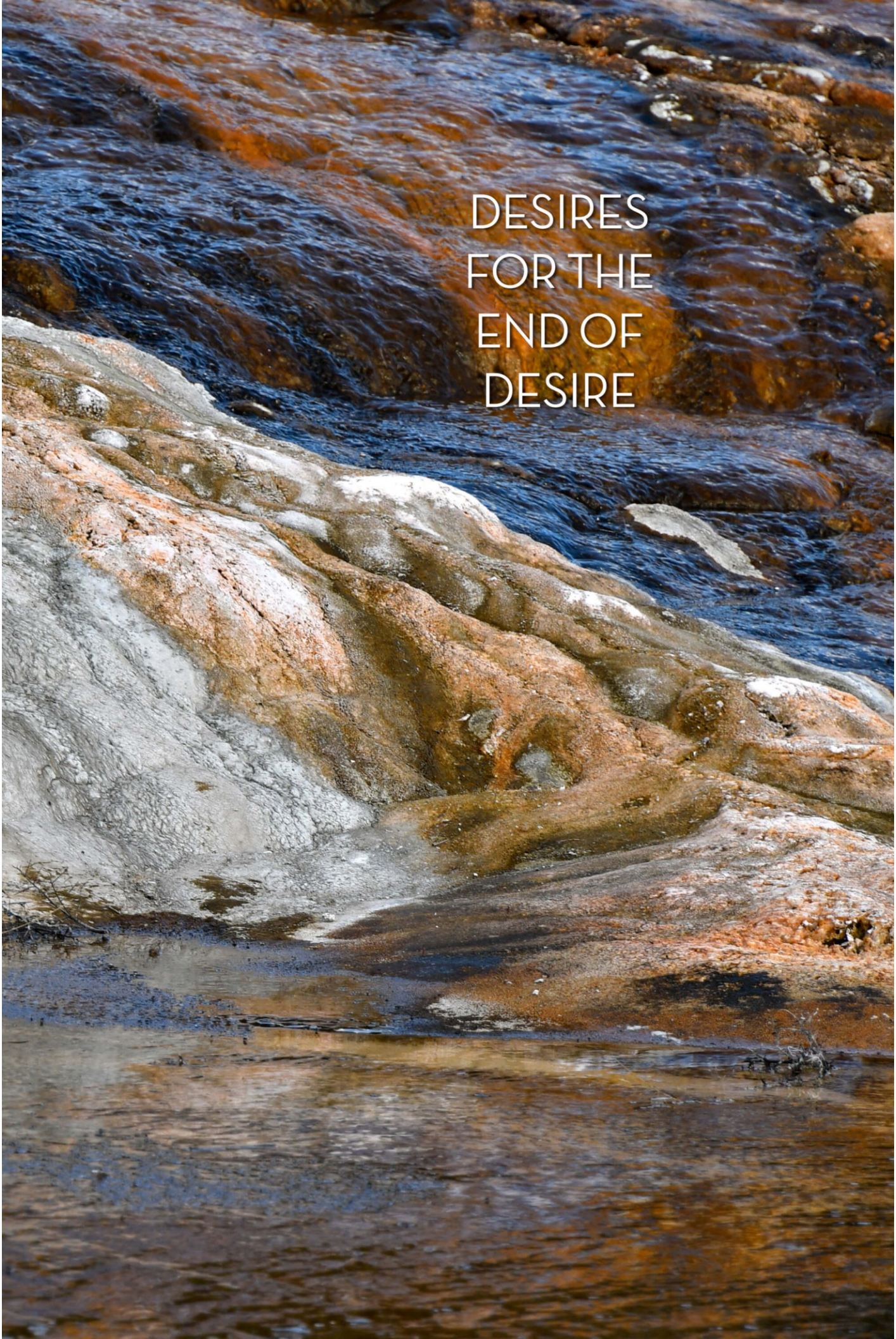
DESIRES
FOR THE
END OF
DESIRE

Desires for the End of Desire

Skillful Determination on the Buddhist Path

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Preface

In April of this year, members of Le Refuge, a Buddhist group located near Marseilles, invited me to lead a ten-day retreat on the topic of the skillful use of desire on the path of Buddhist practice. This is a topic around which there is a great deal of confusion, so I thought it would be a useful theme for the retreat. Because the Buddha identified three types of craving as the origin of suffering and stress, many people have jumped to the conclusion that he condemned all forms of desire. However, he actually taught that skillful desires—aimed at abandoning the causes of suffering and developing mental qualities conducive to the end of suffering—play a crucial role in the path to the ultimate happiness of nibbāna, or unbinding. In fact, the desire to put an end to suffering plays such a dominant role in guiding the path that all the Buddha's other teachings, including his teachings about the self and the world, are designed to serve that desire and to achieve its aim: a happiness so great that it puts an end to the need for desires of any kind.

For this retreat, I focused on the teachings in which the Buddha most clearly advocates adopting values that are in line with the desire for the end of suffering—such as the four determinations and six topics of delight—and the teachings in which he recommends the techniques and strategies for achieving that desire's aim, such as the noble eightfold path and the four bases for success.

The talks of the retreat were presented in two series: a series of evening talks on the role of skillful desire, and a series of morning talks on practical issues arising in meditation, and particularly in the practice of concentration. Every afternoon, there was a period for questions and answers concerning issues arising from the talks and from the retreatants' meditation experiences.

The present book is based on both series of talks along with some of the questions and answers taken from the Q&A periods, presented chronologically. The talks, questions, and answers have been edited and expanded so as to make their coverage of the main topics of the retreat more complete than I was able to manage on the spot.

The talks draw on suttas, or discourses, from the Pāli Canon and on the writings and talks of the ajaans, or teachers, of the Thai forest tradition, in which I was trained. For people unfamiliar with the Canon, I have added passages from the discourses at the back of the book to flesh out some of the points made in the talks. These are followed by a glossary of Pāli terms.

For people unfamiliar with the Thai forest tradition, you should know that it is a meditation tradition founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by Ajaan Sao Kantasīlo and Ajaan Mun Bhūridatto. The ajaans mentioned in the talks all trained under Ajaan Mun. Of these, Ajaan Fuang Jotiko and Ajaan Suwat Suvaco were my teachers. Ajaan Fuang, although he spent some time training directly under Ajaan Mun, spent more time training under one of Ajaan Mun's students, Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo.

Many people have helped with the preparation of this book. In particular, I would like to thank the people of Le Refuge who made the retreat possible; my interpreter, Khamaṇo Bhikkhu (Than Lionel); as well as Jean-Paul and Tadum Bernier and Philippe and Watthani Cortey-Dumont, who hosted my in stay in France. Here in America, Addie Onsanit prepared the transcript of the talks, and the monks at the monastery helped put it in its final form. Any mistakes in the book, of course, are my own responsibility.

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Metta Forest Monastery
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Abbreviations

AN	*Aṅguttara Nikāya*
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya*
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya*
SN	*Saṁyutta Nikāya*
Sn	*Sutta Nipāta*

References to DN and MN are to discourse *(sutta)*; those to the remaining texts are to section *(nipāta*, *saṁyutta)* and discourse. Numbering for AN and SN follows the Thai Edition of the Pāli Canon. All translations from these texts are by the author and are based on the Royal Thai Edition of the Pāli Canon (Bangkok: Mahāmakut Rājavidyālaya, 1982).

April 21, 2025, Evening

Introduction

Good evening and welcome to our retreat. It's always a pleasure to be here with you, and I hope the retreat is helpful for you.

As you probably noticed, the title of the retreat is "Desire." That's actually a misnomer. Desire is not a monolithic thing. We have many desires, and during this retreat we'll be talking about many, not just one.

Now, you may have heard that the Buddha says all desires are bad, but he never said that. He said that desire is basic to all of our experience. In his words, "All phenomena are rooted in desire." As we'll find out in the course of the retreat, every moment is composed of desires putting together experiences, either skillfully or unskillfully. We're not mere passive recipients of sense impressions from outside. With each moment, we're looking for something, based on desire, and everything that comes into our senses gets filtered through our desires.

Because we have so many different desires, and because each desire is like a little arrow pointing in a certain direction—up or down, right of left—we often find that our desires are working at cross-purposes, pulling us apart inside. The Buddha found, however, that we can make our desires more coherent, and that there are actually desires so skillful that they can help lead to the end of suffering.

So the question is not one of putting away or abolishing our desires. And it's not one of simply learning to live peacefully with them. It's more a matter of figuring out which desires are skillful and which ones are not, and of giving more energy and power to our skillful desires, so as to make them even more skillful, while at the same time starving our unskillful ones.

The Buddha's recommendation for dealing with all of our scattered desires is to find the best possible desire, which is to put an end to suffering, and to give it precedence. Then we make all our other desires conform to it.

This overarching desire is not really foreign to us. It implicitly underlies all of our other desires. Every desire aims at happiness of one sort or another. The problem is that each desire is informed by different ideas about what happiness is and how it can be found, and some of those ideas can be very wrong.

So basically we've got to learn how to train our desires.

This training has to focus first on the fact that our ideas of happiness often promise quick but short-lived results with little thought for the long term. As the Buddha said, the beginning of wisdom is when you start thinking about the long term and ask the question: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" That question is wise because you realize,

- one, that your happiness depends on your actions;
- two, that long-term happiness is possible; and
- three, that long-term happiness is better than short-term.

This sounds very simple—in fact, almost too simple. A British translator once translated a verse out of the Dhammapada that focuses on this point: "If you see that a long-term happiness comes from giving up a short-term happiness, the wise person chooses the long term over the short term." This translator added a footnote, saying, "This could not possibly be the meaning of this verse. It's too simple." Well, yes, it's simple, but the question is, how many of us actually live by that principle? All too often, we go for the short term and say, "Let the long term take care of itself."

So the purpose of this retreat is to teach you some wisdom to prioritizing your desires and giving precedence to the long term.

One of the reasons we don't think about the long term is because our society wants us to focus on the short term. They can sell us more of their goods that way. How many advertisements have you ever seen that promise: "Long-term happiness"? The focus instead is basically on the instant gratification you can get right now by buying their products. Human society has been this way for a long time, but one of the things special about the Buddha was he didn't give in to social pressure.

The common reaction is to think, "Long-term happiness is impossible, so I might as well focus on the short term." But the Buddha made up his mind to

focus consistently on the long term and see how successful he could be. He was willing to give up anything that got in the way of his quest for long-term happiness. He tried many different paths until he actually found a path that leads to total happiness and puts a total end to suffering. And it is something human beings can do. He found this not because he was a special divine being. Basically, he was taking qualities that we all have in potential form and devoting himself to developing them as far as they can go: qualities like resolution, ardency, and heedfulness. These are the three qualities, he said, that brought about his awakening.

So the path begins with giving priority to your desire to put an end to suffering and it gives you information on how you can do that. In other words, it gives you a set of values—which is that the end of suffering is possible and it's eminently worthwhile—and it tells you the steps and techniques needed to get there.

To accept the values and follow the steps will mean that you're going to have to give up some old, cherished habits. So the Buddha's teachings are not just about information. When the texts describe how he would teach others, they use four verbs: He would instruct, urge, rouse, and encourage—one part information; three parts encouragement. When I was translating the teachings of the forest masters, I found that with them it's pretty much the same proportion. A little bit of information, a lot of pep talks.

What does it mean to give priority to the end of suffering? It means that you have to sort through your other desires to see which ones are in line with that objective and which ones are not. This may sound a little bit too cerebral, but actually, we're engaging in a selective process like this all the time. As I said, the Buddha saw that every moment is rooted in desire. And because our desires aim in different directions, we're constantly judging which ones are worth the effort to follow and which ones aren't. Often we pass judgment emotionally, subconsciously. The Buddha is simply asking us to do it more consciously and to bring a little more wisdom and a larger perspective to our judgments.

He recommends a course of training for prioritizing our desires, in several stages. At every stage, you'll find that all the desires you're being asked to

cultivate are noble and honorable: desiring to develop qualities like discernment, truth, virtue, relinquishment, universal goodwill, and calm. As the Buddha said, the path is admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end. So it's a good path to be on even if you don't get all the way to the end.

This is a point we'll emhasize several times in the course of the retreat. You may decide that the total end of suffering is a little bit too far away for you, but remember that every step you take in that direction will lead to greater happiness and well-being. I'm not asking you all to gain awakening by the end of the retreat, but every step you make in the right direction will be well worth the effort.

However, you also have to keep in mind that some desires may be helpful on one stage of the path and obstacles on another. In other words, on some stages of the path you have to focus on developing certain qualities that you will then have to abandon on a later stage. So you have to think strategically. In fact, the whole path is strategic. It's a fabricated path that leads to an unfabricated goal—a path nurtured through desire leading to a goal that's so satisfactory that it puts an end to any need for any further desires.

Now, the state of no desire cannot be cloned. In other words, you can't say, "Okay, I'll accept everything as it is, won't want it to be different, and that'll be the end of suffering." That doesn't work. The Buddha is not asking you to pretend that you don't have desires. He's offering something so satisfactory that when you attain it, you won't need desire. You may have heard the path referred to as "the path of being awakened," in which you imitate the qualities of an awakened person as you understand them. But the true path is not a path of imitation or pretense. It requires honesty and truthfulness, really getting to know yourself to see how deep your desires go. In fact, you'll be surprised to find how deeply desires run everything that goes on in your mind.

So the actual path is one of admitting that you have desires and learning how to use them strategically.

What I'm saying here may differ from what you have heard to the effect that we can't have any desire on the path, that we have to let the path unfold on its own, that the desire to have things different from what they are is the cause of

suffering. And it is true that the Buddha said there are three types of craving that cause suffering. But when you want to learn from the Buddha's teachings, you have to listen carefully to his words and attentively watch his actions. Even though he says that the three types of craving cause suffering, he also says that there are types of desire that are part of the path. The desire to develop skillful qualities and the desire to abandon unskillful qualities, for example, is part of right effort.

As for his actions, the Buddha didn't spend his life simply accepting things. If he had simply accepted things, he would have stayed in the palace. He realized he needed to make a change in his actions and a change in his behavior if he wanted to find true happiness. Having found that happiness, he didn't stop with making a change in himself. He also made a change in the world. After gaining awakening, he didn't just sit there under the Bodhi tree. He spent 45 years going all over northern India on foot, finding anyone who could benefit from his teachings and trying to express the teaching in such a way that they would be willing to put it into practice.

Not only that, he wanted to establish a religion that would last for many centuries. Look, for example, at the rules he set down for the monks and the nuns. You have to read the origin stories for these rules to get a sense of how many problems he had to deal with: everything from brahmans who didn't want to wipe their rear, all the way to nuns who tried to kill a monk. There are thousands of these rules. Can you imagine having to spend your time dealing with that kind of thing? Here he is, trying to teach the Dhamma so that people could gain awakening, and the nuns take stones and try to crush a monk's hut. As for the monks, some of them exposed themselves to nuns.

He said he was going to establish the religion for many centuries. You don't do that without having a strong determination. So both in his words and his actions, the Buddha is endorsing the principle that some desires, even very strong ones, are skillful, the important thing being that he learned how to use desires strategically so as to get the best possible results.

This strategy of using desire to overcome desire is found in many parts of the Canon. I'll give you two examples.

The first is the image of trying to get milk out of a cow. Some people try to get milk out of the cow by twisting the horn. They twist and they don't get any milk. They twist harder, they still don't get any milk. Some of them will say, "Let's stop twisting the horn." Then they just sit there, giving up on the idea of getting milk, and finding satisfaction in simply being aware of the cow. Now, cow-awareness does stop harassing the cow, and it's much easier on you. But cow-awareness is not going to get you the milk that's actually there in the cow. You simply have to pull the right part of the cow. So the question is not a matter of having no effort and no desire. The question is a matter of focusing your efforts and desires at the right place.

The second example comes from a passage where Ven. Sāriputta is talking to a group of monks who are about to go to a place where Buddhism has never been taught before. He asks them, "If wise people there ask you, 'What does the Buddha teach?' what are you doing to say?" They respond, "We'd come a long way to hear what *you* would have to say." He replies that the first thing he would say would be, "Our teacher teaches the subduing of desire and passion." Then he goes on to explain why the subduing of desire and passion a good thing. And in the course of his explanation, he's actually explaining why someone would *want* to do that. He's showing the monks how to give rise in their listeners to a desire to follow the teaching.

So, even though we're trying to aim at the end of desire, we use desire to get there. After all, the path is something you have to do, and to do it, you have to want to do it. It's not a mushroom that sprouts in the forest on its own.

An important part of this retreat will involve mastering the skills of right concentration, one of the important factors of the path, and that will require cultivating the desire to *want* to get the mind into that state of concentration and keep it there. We do this partly to put ourselves in the right mood to follow the path, and partly to put the mind in a good position to observe itself clearly. To progress on the path will depend on your ability to observe your own actions, to see what works and what doesn't work in the direction of putting an end to the causes of suffering. That will require being alert, mindful, and focused, along with a strong sense of well-being. The well-being

is needed so that you won't be so hungry to go after immediate pleasures. These are the qualities fostered by concentration when it's right.

The organization of the retreat will be as follows: meditation during most of the day, talks on the topic of skillful desire in the evening, and talks on meditation in the morning. There will be a session of questions and answers in the afternoon. We'll provide pieces of paper on which you can write down your questions and put them here in the bowl. I can't guarantee that we'll get to all the questions—during the last retreat there were days when the bowl contained an enormous pile—but we'll try to answer all the questions that are relevant to the topic of the retreat.

So. Rather than cluttering your mind with more information tonight, I'd like us to sit in meditation for a while, focused on the breath. That will get you in the best position to benefit the most from this retreat.

(Guided meditation)

April 22, 2025, Morning

The Problem of Distraction

We're practicing mindfulness of breathing. One of the qualities we're trying to develop as we do so is concentration. The Pāli word here is *samādhi*. Sometimes you hear people object to "concentration" as a translation for *samādhi* because getting the mind into a state of concentration requires desire, and desire is bad. However, as we'll see in the course of this retreat, desire, skillful desire, is required for the path as a whole. In fact, the Buddha points to concentration as a prime example of a path factor based on desire.

Another reason that people give for objecting to translating *samādhi* as "concentration" is that it sounds tense, too narrowly focused. Now, it is true that the images and similes the Buddha uses to describe samādhi indicate a broad, full-body awareness: a lake filled with the waters of a cool spring; lotuses saturated with still water from their roots to their tips; a person wrapped in a white cloth from head to foot. But still, the mental state indicated by *samādhi* is much more strongly focused and firmly established than a simple state of calm.

For one thing, the Pāli language has a separate word for calm, *passaddhi*. It's one of the factors of awakening. Samādhi is a separate factor of awakening that builds on calm, but is more unified. This is indicated by the word the texts use to define *samādhi*, which is *cittass'ekaggatā:* unification of mind. Literally, that's *cittassa*, of heart or mind; *eka*, one; *agga*, gathering place. *Tā* is a suffix that changes the word into a noun. Added up, that means a state in which the mind stays gathered around a single object, support, or theme. The theme is single both in the sense that it's the one thing you're focused on, and in the sense that it fills the entirety of your awareness.

Now, this would merely be an interesting case of semantics if it weren't for the fact that these definitions have a very practical impact on what we're trying to do here. We're trying to keep the mind gathered around one thing, which is

the breath. And because the texts describe it as a gathering place or a *vihāra*, a dwelling place, we try to settle in and stay there. We don't let the mind follow many different topics. We're not just accepting and aware as it wanders around wherever it will. If it wanders away from the breath, we try to drop the distraction so that we can bring it back. If it wanders off again, we drop that distraction, too, and return to the breath—again and again, until it finally settles down. We're working on a skill, and we're trying to make a difference in the mind. If we simply follow the mind as it wanders around, even if we do it mindfully, it doesn't make much of a difference. But if we train the mind to stay with one thing consistently, we can make a big difference.

One difference is that the mind gathers strength. It's like exercising a muscle that you didn't exercise before. At first the muscle seems weak and the exercise awkward, but with steady practice the muscle becomes stronger, the exercise easier, and you find that you can do things you couldn't do before.

The mind also gets to see things it didn't see before. As it stays gathered around the breath, it sees and comes to appreciate subtleties in the breath that it didn't detect before. You become a connoisseur of your breath. This enables the mind to settle down with a greater and greater sense of satisfaction, stability, and well-being in the present moment.

At the same time, as it stays focused on the breath, it sees more clearly how it plays a role in creating feelings of pleasure and pain in the present moment. This is an important aspect of insight, and a topic we'll talk about more tomorrow morning.

And finally, when the mind tries to gather itself around the breath, it gets to see itself more clearly. This is one of the prime reasons why the Buddha taught mindfulness of breathing more than any other meditation topic. When you focus on the breath, you get to see events in the mind more clearly because the breath is your anchor in the present moment. You can't watch a past breath or a future breath. When you watch the breath, you know you're in the present. And the breath is right next to the mind. As you observe the mind in relation to the breath, you're not just speculating about your mind in the past or the future. You're observing it in action in the present. And you're not just observing it. You're also learning to train the mind to abandon unskillful

thoughts and desires, and to develop skillful desires in their place. This is something you have to do from the very beginning of the practice all the way through to the end.

Ajaan Lee notes that when you're alert to what you're doing as you try to stay focused on the breath, your alertness is like a pulley that you can pull in two directions—toward the breath and toward the mind—to make sure that they stay together. If the mind wanders off, you have to be alert to the fact, so that you can drop the distraction. Alertness is what enables you to see the problem. Mindfulness recognizes it as a problem, as you remember that you're not here to wander around. And then ardency is what tries to solve the problem.

Here, mindfulness also plays a second role. It enables you to remember what strategies you can use to bring the mind back. Remember: The Buddha defined mindfulness not as full awareness or bare awareness, but as a faculty of memory, the ability to keep things in mind, even things that were said or done a long time ago. Alertness doesn't mean being generally aware of what's going on in the present moment. It means specifically knowing what you're doing when you're doing it, along with the results that come from what you're doing.

So, what do you keep in mind when you're dealing with distractions? The Buddha's instructions on how to treat the mind as you develop mindfulness of breathing cover three activities: gladdening, concentrating, and releasing. Those are the three activities I'd like to focus on this morning.

The gladdening and concentrating are things you do proactively to keep the mind from wandering off. In gladdening, you make yourself happy to be here focused on the breath. Another term the Buddha uses for this ability to make yourself glad is "delight." The Pāli word is *nandi*. It's a term we'll discuss in detail further on in the retreat.

You start out by using what are called verbal fabrications. We'll talk more about the word "fabrication" tonight. Here just note that verbal fabrication means the way you talk to yourself. You can talk to yourself about what a good thing it is to be here with no other responsibilities so that you can focus on getting to know your own mind much better. You have the opportunity to

develop a skill that has helped people for thousands of years, from the time of the Buddha to now. You can breathe in ways that feel refreshing and soothing. In this way, you're using the breath to gladden the mind. If you have chronic illnesses or pains, you have the opportunity to learn how to use the way you breathe and spread the breath energies in the body to help alleviate the pain and the illness.

In other words, breathing is not only pleasant, but also interesting, as it allows you to learn more about the potentials you have in the present moment, both in body and in mind. Remember, when we speak of the breath, it's not just the feelings of air touching the nose. It's part of the energy or wind property in the body, which can be felt anywhere in the body at all.

This relates to the next step, which is concentrating. In concentrating, as we noted with regard to the images the Buddha uses to describe concentration, you're trying to develop a state of full-body awareness. Once the rhythm of the breath is comfortable, you can allow that comfortable breathing to spread along the nerves, throughout the body, out to all the pores of the skin. To do this, you also have to broaden your awareness to encompass the entire body all at once. When you're able to maintain that full-body awareness, full-body breathing, and full-body pleasure, you give your mind a sound foundation here in the present moment.

If the mind's awareness were limited to one point, it could easily get knocked off balance. Here, though, other things may appear in the context of this larger frame of reference, but as long as you don't lose touch with the frame, those things don't disturb the stability of your concentration. They're like clouds that float through the sky but don't disturb the sky. However, it takes some skill to develop this full-body concentration and to maintain it. That's because the mind has a tendency, when something new comes along, to drop what it's doing and then go running after the new thing.

It's like a bird with a piece of food in its mouth. You put a mirror in front of it, it sees another bird with a piece of food in its mouth, so it drops the food in its mouth to go after the reflection of the food in the mirror. Hold that image in mind throughout the week, okay? See how many times you act in the same way.

This is where we have to engage in releasing the mind. The word "release" has many levels of meaning, all the way from releasing the mind temporarily from distractions, to releasing it once and for all from its limitations. But this morning, we're going to focus on the most basic level: the Buddha's five strategies for releasing yourself from distracting thoughts as you try to get the mind into a state of concentration.

The first strategy is replacing the distraction with another more skillful topic to focus on. This can mean simply bringing it back to the breath, or it can mean bringing up another topic related to the Dhamma that would make you glad to get back to the breath. For example, you can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha in a way that makes you feel inspired to practice harder. Or you can recollect some of your own generosity and virtue to give yourself a sense of self-confidence that, yes, you can do this practice as well.

Or if you find that the mind is lazy, you can recollect death. You don't know when death is going to come. You do know, however, that you'll have to develop some skills before it does come—and this is your opportunity to develop those skills right now. Recollection of death doesn't mean simply thinking, "Death, death, death." Instead, you try to make yourself more heedful: There's work that needs to be done in the mind and you don't know how much time you have to do it, but you do have right now.

The Buddha's image for this first strategy is of a carpenter who uses a small peg to remove a larger peg of wood. In other words, you use one thought to take another thought out. That's the first strategy.

The second strategy is to focus on the drawbacks of the distraction. If you were to think those thoughts for a whole day, what would you accomplish? Either it would be a simple waste of time or it would get you to do things that are unskillful. "Skillful" means harmless and leading to the end of suffering. "Unskillful" means that it would cause harm. You already know that you don't have much time in your life, so why waste even a few minutes of it?

One technique that I like to use here is to ask myself, "If this were a movie, would I pay to watch it?" Most of the time, the answer is No. The acting is

horrible. The storyline is bad. The roles aren't being played by Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. So why waste your time?

The Buddha's image here is of a young girl or a young man looking in the mirror and seeing the carcass of a dead snake or a dead dog around their neck. They would try to get rid of it as fast as possible. The same with unskillful thoughts: When you see the drawbacks of the distraction, you want to get rid of it as soon as you can. That's the second strategy.

The third strategy is to ignore the thought. If it's there and it won't go away, you don't have to pay attention to it. It's as if you're in a large room, like this one. You're in one corner and you have work to do. There are other people in the other corner, chatting away. If they won't stop talking or go away, you just don't pay attention to them. You don't have to drive them out.

Another image that I like to use is of a stray dog begging for food. When you give attention to thoughts, that feeds them. So, if you don't pay attention to the thoughts, it's like not giving any food to the stray dog. It'll whine for a while, but after it sees that you're not interested, it'll go away.

You learn some important lessons from this strategy, one of which is how paying attention to your thoughts actually feeds them. It's an important lesson on how to deal with old kamma—of thoughts coming in unbidden in the mind. The Buddha's image here is of a man closing his eyes so that he doesn't see something he doesn't want to see. That's the third strategy.

The fourth is to relax the fabrication of the thought. Look for any pattern of tension in the body that corresponds to that thought. The more sensitive you are to the breath energies in the body, the more easily you'll see this. When you sense that tension, relax it, and the thought will disappear.

People sometimes complain about concentration as being tense, but it's tension with a purpose. Random thinking also involves tension, but it serves no purpose at all. When I was in Thailand, one of the other monks was wondering how I would get exhausted simply doing translation work. He said, "You're just sitting there scratching with a pen. How can that be tiring?" I told him, "Just thinking of the translation has my whole body tense."

So he tried translating Ajaan Lee's biography from Thai into northeastern Thai, which is like Lao. After one day, he said his whole head itched all over.

That's a pattern of tension in the body that goes with thinking.

The Buddha's image for this strategy is of a man who is walking, and he finally says, "Why am I walking? It's easier to stand." Or a man standing, deciding, "Why am I standing? Why don't I sit down?" Or a man sitting, saying, "Why am I sitting? Why don't I lie down?" You relax the tension.

Finally, the fifth strategy: If the other strategies don't work, you clench your teeth, place the tip of your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and tell yourself, "I will not think that thought." In Thailand, they recommend using a meditation word rapidly, machine-gun fast: "*Buddhobuddhobuddho.*" This is the last resort. It's as if you have a toolbox with many refined tools, but also a sledgehammer. If your refined tools don't work on a particular job, you bang it with the sledgehammer. This works only for a little while, but at least it clears the air for a bit. The Buddha's image here is of a strong man beating down a weak man.

So think of these five strategies as five different tools, tools for releasing your mind from distractions. And it's good to have a complete toolbox. That way, as you're sitting here and a distraction comes in, you have a wide range of strategies you can choose from.

The rewards of being skillful with these strategies is that you can think the thoughts you want to think, and you don't have to think the thoughts you don't want to think. And, over time, you develop higher and higher standards for what kinds of thoughts are worth thinking.

In addition to these five strategies, the Buddha also teaches specific strategies for specific hindrances to concentration—hindrances like sleepiness or sexual desire. We'll treat these in more detail the day after tomorrow.

As we've seen, the Buddha's strategies for dealing with these distractions come down to those three activities for bringing the mind to a state of full-body concentration. Two of them are proactive—gladdening and concentrating—and one is a first-aid cure, which is releasing the mind. Always keep these three activities in mind as you try to get the mind happy and skillful at gathering and staying gathered into one.

(Meditation)

In a few minutes we'll have a period of walking meditation. Basically, you'll stay focused on the breath, just as you do when you're sitting, simply that you add the extra activity of walking. It's a good practice for carrying your concentration practice into daily life.

Find a spot on the grounds where you can have a path that's at least 30 paces long. Keep your hands clasped either in front of you or behind you. Walk at a fairly normal pace—slightly slower than normal, but fast enough so that if a car came along, you'd be able to get out of the way.

When you get to the end of the path, stop for a second. Turn one direction or the other. Always try to turn in the same direction, though. Make sure that you're with the breath before you start down the path again, determine that you'll stay with the breath until you get to the other end of the path, and then start walking.

The image they have in the Canon is of a man walking between a beauty queen singing and dancing on one side, and a crowd of people on the other side, excited about the queen singing and dancing. The man has to walk between the two, with a bowl of oil filled to the brim on top of his head. Behind him is another man with a raised sword. If the first man spills even a drop of oil, the man behind him will cut off his head. So, don't drop any oil. Come back at 10:30 with your heads well-attached.

April 22, 2025, Afternoon

Q & A

Q: Ajaan, I've been taught to make as little noise as possible when breathing during meditation, and to avoid any yoga type of breathing, like prānayama. Could you please give your thoughts on this? Is this in line with your teachings on Method Two? Thank you.

A: When breathing with a group like this, try to breathe quietly. Otherwise, other people who are trying to observe their own breath will end up observing yours. When you're meditating alone, it doesn't matter how much noise you make with your breathing.

With prānayama, you make up your mind ahead of time how you're going to breathe. There may be times when that's useful, but it's more important that you learn how to be sensitive to what really feels good in the present moment, and adjust your breathing accordingly.

Q: I find that when I meditate outside in nature, the sounds help me focus quicker than when I meditate inside. Is that a hindrance?

A: You want to learn how to meditate in any situation. If you're meditating outside and the sounds of nature help you, that's perfectly fine. But also try to find a way that when you're meditating inside, without the sounds, you can still get the mind to settle down.

Once we had the opposite problem at the monastery: someone who had learned to meditate only inside at meditation retreats. After his first day meditating outside in our grove, he complained that the grove was too noisy. There were the birds singing, the insects crawling through the leaves. So I had to tell him, "If the sounds come in, just let them go right through you. Think of your awareness as being like a large screen in a window. And just as the wind can go through the screen because the screen doesn't try to catch the wind, in the same way just let the sounds go right through you without your trying to catch them."

Q: You said yesterday that the path is admirable in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end, but I am rather trying to develop happiness. So does it make the practitioner happy in the beginning, middle, and end? Or only in the long term?

A: A lot of this will depend on you. You can make yourself happy being here. You can think about how good it is to be on this path. Or you can make yourself miserable.

There was one time we were meditating as a group outside at the monastery. One woman had brought a friend. It was a day like today: The weather was nice, the birds were quiet, there wasn't much sound. At the end of the session, the friend opened her eyes and said, "I have never suffered so much in my life." So it's really up to you to find joy in the path. And of course, as the results begin to come, you can talk to yourself about how good it is that you're getting good results. Otherwise, if you say, "I've spent 15 minutes on this and I haven't gotten to the first jhāna yet," it's going to be a long, hard slog.

Q: Generally, one should not think about other people breaking the precepts or their other unskillful actions, but if you desire someone, i.e., through attraction, can you think about their unskillful actions as a way of breaking the spell or developing dispassion?

A: Of course. Anything you can think of to break the spell is fine. In French, do they have the expression "vipassanā romance"? Vipassanā romance is when you're sitting meditating in a group, and you see someone else in the group who's very attractive. So, instead of looking at your breath, you spend your time thinking about what a wonderful time you could have together.

Once I read about a woman who was very much attracted to a young man in a meditation group. She spent the meditation session thinking about him. Well, it turned out he was thinking about her. So halfway through the retreat, they left. She discovered that he was not at all like she thought he was. So she came back to the meditation hall and had a vipassanā divorce, imagining all the things about him that were unattractive. That can be a useful tool for staying on the path.

Q: Is it skillful to focus on pleasant sensations in the mind?

A: If you see that these sensations make it easier to stay in the present moment, it's perfectly fine. If you can relate these sensations to the breath to make them longer and more established, so much the better.

The problem is that if you focus on the pleasant sensations without relating them to the breath, it's very easy to go into a state of semi-consciousness, called delusion concentration. You're sitting here, it feels very pleasant, but you're not really clear about where you're focused. Sometimes you come out of it and wonder, "Was I awake? Was I asleep?" This can happen especially as the mind is beginning to settle down but is not yet fully established on the meditation object.

The way to get past it, once you've established a sense of pleasure, is to give yourself work to do. You can think about the breath energy going through many different parts of the body. Or you can visualize the bones in your body. In fact, I'll give you a guided bone meditation in a couple of days.

Q: This is a meditation question. I find that there is a lower and a higher level of working with pain. The lower level is releasing pain bit by bit, for example by breathing into it. The higher level is separating pain from breath energies in the same location, paying attention to the breath part and not letting the pain make inroads. Sometimes I can feel that I'm lazy when working on the lower level. Is this a good way to think?

A: Both approaches are good. The second approach requires more discernment, but it's a mistake when you're meditating to say, "I must always use the higher method." Notice which method works for your situation right here, right now. If the "lower" method works, that's perfectly fine. It helps get you through a lot of pains that would otherwise be difficult to sit through.

Being a meditator is like being a skilled craftsman. You've got lots of different skills. You're not always going to use the highest level of skill. Use whatever works at that particular time—and don't let your pride get in the way.

Q: In Aṅguttara 10:58, there's a passage that says all phenomena are ruled by concentration. Why is that?

A: When the mind is in concentration, it's at its most focused and has its highest power. The power of concentration can change things. Now, there will be certain things that the concentration cannot change, but you want to give it a try first. That's when you begin to see where your ability to change things ends and where you have to learn how to accept things.

Q: There's not too much clutter in my mind, but my mind is not concentrated enough.

A: This problem usually comes from not focusing enough. Instead of trying to be aware of the whole body all at once, you can tell yourself, "I'm going to stay with one section of the body." That will give you more focus to the concentration. Once you're able to do that, *then* you think about spreading your awareness to the rest of the body.

Q: What are the worlds without form? What do they correspond to?

A: They correspond to formless states of concentration where your sense of the body begins to dissolve away and then gradually disappears.

What happens is that the breath energies in the body get very, very still. You begin to realize that the movement of the breath energies is what gives you the sense of the shape of the body. Without that movement, the sense of where the surface of the body lies begins to disappear. Your body seems to be like a cloud made up of little dots of moisture. You focus on the space between the dots, and there's a sense that that space has no boundary. This is what's called the dimension of the infinitude of space.

After a while, you ask yourself, "Well, what's aware of that space?" Then you stay with that awareness. That becomes the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. Then that state of oneness with the consciousness begins to disappear, even though your concentration is still very strong. As the sense of the oneness of your awareness begins to dissolve away, that's the dimension of nothingness.

Some people, when they die, actually die into these states and get reborn in these worlds. The formless worlds can be very pleasant places to be, but you're totally out of touch with everyone else. When the Buddha's teachers died, they had attained these states of concentration so they went to these worlds. That's

why he couldn't teach them. It was as if they had turned off their cell phones. So it's a pleasant place to be, but not so good if you want to hear the Dhamma.

But while you're meditating here, if you find that you can get into these states, they're good states to be in for the sake of discernment because the breath isn't getting in the way of observing what's going on in the mind. You actually can use your discernment to gain awakening in these states. So, don't die into them, but you can use them here and now.

Q: The desire to be safe is driving a lot of my behavior, especially around other people. This causes a lot of tension in my mind and body, which I tend to ignore as I'm so extremely focused. It hinders my meditation practice. How to let go of my fear of being hurt or harmed, and how to advise me to deal with this discomfort that arises when I try to stay with the internal mind-body instead.

A: Your problem is that as you focus inside, you find that you're neglecting your outside fortifications and you feel that you constantly have to need to keep those fortifications going. What you have to do is to tell yourself that, "As I focus inside, I'm going to find something inside that nobody can touch, nobody can harm." There is where your true safety is going to be. You know eventually that the body is going to die. As for other people's opinions of you or power over you, you have no way of controlling them. But you can find this place of security inside that nobody can touch. So instead of running away from your safety, as you're meditating, you're actually coming toward a safer place to be.

Q: At the last retreat, you distinguished three types of desire: the desire for sensuality, the desire for becoming, the desire for non-becoming. It seems sometimes that by nature, insatiable desire is unskillful. The desire to do good to others and to oneself: Is it spontaneous, or is it only through training that you can give rise to it? In other words, do we innately have spontaneous goodwill? Do good desires spontaneously happen?

A: Of course, skillful desires like this can be spontaneous, but you can't depend on them, because they don't arise spontaneously all the time. You have to learn how to give rise to them when you need them. In other words,

sometimes there are cases where goodwill arises spontaneously. But the Buddha is saying that, to be truly safe, you have to be able to give rise to it in all situations. That's what this retreat is all about: learning to foster skillful desires in all situations because you're going to need them in all situations. Skillful desires can occur naturally, but unskillful desires can occur naturally as well. Our goodwill tends to be partial. Sometimes we're told that goodwill is natural to us. But universal goodwill is not natural. This is why universal goodwill is called a *brahma-vihāra*—something that comes naturally to brahmās, who are devas on a very high level. It's not a *manussa-vihāra*, something that comes naturally to human beings on Earth.

If you go on a brahma-vihāra meditation retreat, you can spend the whole week thinking, "May all beings be happy. May all beings be happy. May all beings be happy." But then it can happen that you get in your car and drive away, somebody cuts in front of you, and you think, "May this being go to hell." You have to develop the attitude, "May this being learn how to drive skillfully."

April 22, 2025, Evening

The Problem of Desires

In the old days, when a monk gave a talk in Thailand, he would have a fan in front of his face so that he couldn't see the faces of the people he was talking to. That was so that he wouldn't be influenced by their expressions. This is important. I have a friend, a lay Dhamma teacher, who used to be a professor at a university in Boston. He told me once about another professor who had a habit of pacing back and forth in front of the room as he gave his lectures. His field was behavioral psychology.

His students, being students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, decided to do a behavioral psychology experiment on him. When he was in the left corner of the room, they would pay attention, look intently at him, take notes. When he was in the right corner of the room, they would look out the window. Nobody would take notes. Within two weeks, they had him staying in the left corner. And he didn't realize what had happened. So I don't want to look at your faces while I'm giving this talk. Otherwise, when there are certain things that need to be said that you don't like, I'll stop saying them. And then you won't get to hear them.

So. Close your eyes.

To understand the role of desire in the ordinary mind and along the path, we have to understand the Buddha's analysis of what's happening in the present moment, because that's where desires are conceived, judged, and either followed or rejected.

The present moment is not a given. It's fabricated out of the raw material provided by past actions. You're the one fabricating it, which is why your sense of self is so dependent on how you fabricate things.

There are three types of fabrication, which I mentioned briefly earlier today: bodily, verbal, and mental.

• Bodily fabrication is the way you breathe.

• Verbal fabrication is the way you talk to yourself. In technical terms, it's called directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to a particular topic, and then you make comments about it, you ask questions, you answer the questions. That's the evaluation.

• Finally, there are mental fabrications, which are perceptions and feelings.

Perceptions are the labels that you apply to things. There can be three stages of this kind of perception. We can illustrate them by thinking about a red light at an intersection. One, you notice that its color is red. That's one level of perception: "red." The second level is, what does red mean? In this case, it means, "Stop." Then third, you have the perception as to whether it's important to pay attention to or not. In other words, is it important to follow what the red light is saying or can you ignore it?

So perceptions are mental acts that give meanings to things.

As for feelings, these are feeling tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain.

These three types of fabrication are the processes by which we put together the raw material that comes from our past kamma and actually make it into an experience in the present moment. They usually function on a subconscious level. One of the purposes of meditation is to bring them more up into the conscious level so that we can see them clearly, because it's through these three fabrications that we also create our desires.

Try to remember this teaching on the three fabrications because it's going to play a big role throughout our discussions for the remainder of the retreat.

Now, the act of fabrication is always for the sake of something, for the purpose of something—usually for happiness or pleasure. It's an expression of a desire to gain results. This is why the Buddha said that all phenomena are rooted in desire. This means that the present moment is not static, and it's not divorced from the past or the future. It's constantly in motion toward the future, using the results of the past. It's propelled by your desires.

We have a subconscious sense that if we don't desire things, everything will fall apart. This is one of the reasons why we hold on so tightly to our desires.

It's also one of the reasons why the mind takes pleasure in agency, because it gives you a sense of power.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a German psychologist who was studying infant behavior noticed that the thing that makes babies happiest is doing something again and again, and getting the same results. It gives them a sense of power over their environment. This is why they make noises again and again and again. It gives them a sense of power. It can drive you crazy, but for them, it's an expression of agency. As we grow up, we stop making noises again and again—except when we sing or make music—but we do continue to take pleasure in our sense of agency in having some power over our environment.

So the mind doesn't just register facts. It exercises its agency. The basic unit of our knowledge is a movement toward the future coupled with a judgment as to which movements or desires we should follow for the best results. This means that we're out looking for sensory input in order to satisfy this movement toward the future. We operate with filters, absorbing sensory input only if we think that it will have some potential to satisfy our desires. Either we think that the input is satisfactory in and of itself or we can imagine using it for the purpose of some further happiness.

This gives rise to three main problems.

• Many of our desires are in conflict with one another.

• Too many of our desires cause us to act in ways that lead eventually to harm.

• And finally, we can make faulty value judgments. The mind is constantly running what's called a cost-benefit analysis to judge which desires are worth following and which ones are not. In the Buddha's terminology, this is called comparing the allure with the drawbacks of each desire. The allure is the gain you associate with following the desire. The drawbacks have to do with the difficulties you'll meet up with and the problems that will be caused by following the desire.

This may sound a little too intellectual and theoretical, but in actual practice it involves a lot of emotions and a lot of ignorance. Very often we don't even know why we like something or we can't say No to desires that we

know are harmful. That's because the allure is strong but often hidden. Part of the mind actively hides it because the allure wouldn't stand up to serious scrutiny. As a result, we don't really know what we're doing.

Another problem is that the options that the mind presents to itself are often false dichotomies. It's like politics: They say, "You have to choose either this person or that person. You have no other options." Neither person is really desirable, so they want you to say, "Well, given that that's the only choice I have, I'll go with the better of the two." In America we call this "choosing the lesser of two evils."

There was a great political advertisement years back. A reporter goes to a child and asks, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" And the child responds, "I want to choose the lesser of two evils." It's very sad, but it's not just politics. Often the mind plays this trick on itself as well. You tell yourself that the only options are *x* and *y*, even though there's a whole alphabet of other options, many of which work much better. The ordinary process of this cost-benefit analysis ends with a temporary value judgment: yes or no, right now, for the time being. You leave open the possibility that you might change your mind later on, when presented with different choices and alternatives.

Now, one of the big problems is that the mind, when focusing on a desire, engages in a process called becoming. This is a sense of yourself in a world of experience centered on a desired object. When you think of something you want, you then ask yourself, "Where can that be found? And which parts of that world are actually helpful in getting it, and which ones will get in the way?" Parts of the world outside that are not relevant to that object are not part of that particular becoming.

As for your sense of self in that becoming, you go into that world. The parts of you that are relevant to that desired object, in other words, the ones that play a role in this particular becoming—either your abilities to gain the object or your lack of abilities to gain it—form your identity in that world. Other aspects of yourself that are not relevant in this way play no role in your sense of self in that particular becoming.

So both your sense of the world and your sense of yourself are defined by what's relevant to that particular desire.

Now, this happens on two scales: *micro*, inside the mind; and *macro*, in the world outside. On the micro level, you think of something you want, you can imagine the world in your mind, and you think of yourself playing a role in that imaginary world. Then, many of these inner becomings actually start playing a role in creating becomings on the macro level as well.

For example, you're sitting here and you want some pizza. You think, "When the monk stops talking, I can go over to Moustier." Then you actually go. That's how becoming goes from interior to exterior, from micro to macro. This also happens at the moment of death. As you realize you cannot stay in this world or in this body anymore, a vision will appear to you. If it's attractive, you'll go into it. Sometimes, when you're desperate at death, you'll enter even into a becoming that's not attractive. In either case, that's how you get reborn into another world, based on the alternatives that are offered to the mind, which in turn are based on your past kamma.

This process of becoming is how we approach all situations. Nobody has to teach us, we just keep doing this. We're kind of like beavers. A beaver's approach to every problem is, "Build a dam, build a lodge"—a home for themselves in the pond created by the dam.

They've even found that little baby beavers who lost their parents and were then raised by human beings, when they go into the wild, start building dams and making lodges, even though there was no one to show them how. That's their solution to every problem. The same with human beings: Our solution to every problem is to create a state of becoming. Yet this is why we suffer.

This process is best understood by observing more carefully these micro-level becomings in the mind. When you have the sense of self within this process of becoming, it can take on one of three roles: the agent, the consumer, and the commentator.

The agent is the part of you that says, "I can do this."

The consumer is the part that says, "I will enjoy the results."

And the commentator is the part that makes comments on both the agent and the consumer. In other words: Is the agent doing well enough? Is the consumer really going to be satisfied by this? Does the consumer have high enough standards for what counts as happiness?

There's a constant conversation among these three.

We're attached to these inner roles because we sense that they're the only way of bringing happiness. They get fed into the process of cost-benefit analysis, as we desire certain things and we feel that we're competent to succeed at them. The commentator either encourages the other two, or else it says, "Stop, this is not working, you've got to change what you're going." From the Buddha's point of view, this is where things can go wrong. You have a limited idea of what you can do. You have a limited idea of what kinds of happiness are possible. And your commentator can be really crazy.

Many of us don't like our inner commentator. In English we talk about the inner critic. A lot of people would like to get rid of their inner critic because it doesn't seem to be very friendly. But we need it. We need some part of the mind to evaluate what we're doing. One of the topics of the retreat this week is how to train your inner critic so it's actually a helpful commentator.

Part of that training will be to expand your sense of what's possible in finding happiness. Many of the fabrications that we do in the present moment give meager results because we have limited perceptions of what's possible and what's desirable, and we have a limited sense of our self. We tell ourselves, "Only so much is possible in this world," or "I personally am capable of only so much."

Other times we have a problem because our many inner selves get into conflict with one another. This is where we develop what's called the inner committee that we've talked about in previous retreats. Many "you's" inside your mind have different opinions on how to find happiness.

A lot of this inner conversation is done in ignorance. It's as if we have an inner bureaucracy. You have the chairman on the top floor who thinks he knows what's going on, but there are workers on the other floors who have other ideas and have learned how to sneak things past the chairman. One of the purposes of meditation is to make all the different layers inside your mind available to your awareness so that you can actually see what's going on and do it more skillfully.

Now, before I talk about how the Buddha would solve this problem, I'd like to talk about how other philosophies here in the West have tried to solve this

problem in the past, so that you can see what's special about the Buddha's solution. In particular, I'd like to focus on three main approaches in the West: two extremes, and a set of attempts to find a middle ground between those extremes based on objective standards.

What all three approaches have in common is that they start with assumptions about the nature of the world and your position within that world. In other words, they start with the assumptions of becoming—your identity in a world of experience—and from those assumptions they draw conclusions about how you should deal with your conflicting desires. And we should note at the outset that none of them can take you beyond becoming. They all agree that your desires find meaning within the terms of becoming, and you have to accept that that's as far as they can take you. Or so they say.

1) The first extreme is derived from hedonism, the belief that the world contains no objective standards for judging your desires, so you should follow whatever desires please you. In English we say, "Different strokes for different folks." Your standards for which desires you choose to act on are entirely up to you, and it's accepted that your desires are arbitrary. In other words, in this theory, suffering comes from not getting to do what you want to do. There's no need for any inner unity among your desires. It's okay to be pulled in different directions at different times because each desire is taking you where you want to go anyhow.

The most extreme example of this approach is, "Do what you want and don't worry about the consequences." This is the theory implicit in a lot of advertising.

A more pragmatic version of this approach says, "You have to take into consideration what the results of your actions are going to be, but it's really up to you to decide what you want to achieve, because there are no objective standards as to what's right and wrong."

Another version of this attitude comes from what's called the human potential movement, which is that you as a human being have your own distinct set of potentials—political, sexual, intellectual, material—and that you should try to develop all the potentials you can. They're all good, and the only constraint on your desires for self-fulfillment are time and energy. I know

some people who have adopted this attitude, and they end up frazzled because they're being pulled by their potentials in many directions all at once.

2) The second extreme goes in the opposite direction entirely. This is the passive, defeatist approach that says, "Desires do nothing but bring on suffering, so just don't desire anything." In other words, "Just relax and don't try to accomplish anything." There are two versions of this extreme.

One says that the nature of the world is that you have no free will and no choices at all. Everything is predetermined by past conditions, so you have no choice but to accept things as they are.

The other version is that you do have choices, but any attempt to exert your free will will always add more suffering because you're unskilled by nature and always making a mess of things.

In either case, the proposed solution is the same: "Don't have any preferences. Don't waste any effort trying to change things. Just find peace by accepting what comes, without wanting things to be different from what they are." Sometimes you hear this presented as the Buddha's teaching, but the Buddha actually attacked the idea that you're powerless to make skillful changes. And as I said, if the Buddha simply accepted things as they were, he would have stayed in the palace.

So those are the two main extremes: Either there's nothing wrong with following your desires, or you shouldn't desire anything at all.

3) The third alternative tries to find a middle ground between these two extremes by establishing objective standards for giving priority to some desires over others. This approach says that the main cause of suffering is that you feel divided within yourself, a sense of inner division that comes from having desires that pull in different directions. To solve this problem of inner division, this approach says, you have to start by defining who you are. Then, from who you are, you determine which desires you should have, and reject any desires that are inappropriate for who you really are. In other words, you choose one state of becoming to act as your primary self and your primary view of the world. As for other desires, you judge them as to whether they promote that state of becoming or not. If they do, you can say Yes to them. If they don't, you should say No.

The different versions of this third alternative come from different ways of defining your self.

For example, from the Romantic point of view, you are an integral part of the universe, and your sense of separate self is an illusion. You have to be sensitive to the urges coming up within you, learning to recognize those that come from the unity of the universe as a whole and distinguishing them from desires coming from a false sense of separateness. Your duty is to express the more universal ones, regardless of whether they follow social conventions.

Another way of defining yourself is that you're just your body. This is the materialist world view. You exist to basically meet the needs of your body and nothing more, so follow the desires that are conducive to your survival and material well-being. Don't pay any attention to desires that go beyond death, because there's nothing in you that will survive death.

Then there's the theistic view, which is that you are a creature of God, so you must bend your will to his.

In some of the theories of this sort, you're taught that you can actually achieve peace through ordering your desires, given the priorities appropriate to what you're told you are. In others, you have to accept the fact that conflict is inevitable and you simply have to do the best you can.

As I said, all three of the main approaches we've mentioned so far are defined within the confines becoming—confined either in defining who you are or defining the world in which you have to try to find happiness. They can't take you beyond becoming, and so they can't take you beyond suffering. The Buddha calls them "thickets of views" and "contortions of views." These are views that keep you ensnared and trapped.

So now, with this range of options in mind, let's look at the Buddha's approach.

With regard to the first extreme, the Buddha says that there are clear, objective standards for what counts as skillful and what doesn't. You have to judge your desires by the results they yield, and you're wise only if you choose desires that lead to a long-term harmless happiness.

With regard to the second extreme, as I already noted, the Buddha says that you have to accept, as a working hypothesis, the principle that you do have the

power to make a difference in your life, and you are capable of mastering the skills to make a good difference, going all the way to the end of suffering. Instead of telling you that you're powerless, the Buddha affirms that you do have the power to change things for the better, and that the desire to change your behavior in a more skillful direction is to be encouraged.

With regard to the third option—determining which desires are most appropriate based on what you are—the Buddha takes the opposite approach. Instead of defining who you are and then deciding what you should desire based on that definition, he starts by having you ask, "What is the best possible thing to desire?" From there you then define yourself in line with that ultimate desire, as someone who wants to do whatever is required to follow the path that can bring that ultimate desire about. At different stages of the path, your definition of your self will change, depending on the skills you have to develop at each stage of the path, but the ultimate desire remains constant.

The Buddha discovered that there is a path that leads to the total end of suffering: That's the best thing to desire. So that's the possibility you always have to keep in mind. Then he has you adopt a certain view of the world in which the actions of that path are possible and fruitful—so fruitful that they take you beyond the confines of the world. The view of the world that he teaches as right view is arranged around this possibility. This path also requires having a healthy sense of self who's capable of following the path and who will benefit from following the path.

But then when you finally get to the end of the path, all those senses of self can be put aside. And you've gone beyond the world. As the Buddha said, there's no need for any further becoming because you've found the ultimate happiness.

Now, it's good to remember that the end of suffering is not a blank, dead space. It's an awareness that's totally sufficient in and of itself. It doesn't need to depend on any object. And it's a happiness so totally satisfying that there's no need for any further desires. There's no need to keep on fabricating the present moment—no need for any becoming, no need for any sense of self, no need to inhabit a world. As Ajaan Suwat once said, "When you experience the ultimate happiness, you have no more interest in knowing whether there's a

self experiencing it or not." The experience of that happiness is totally complete.

Now, for those of us who haven't gotten there yet, it's what in English we call "a hard sell" because it's unlike anything we've ever encountered anywhere before. Because we're so used to building our dams and our lodges, we can't see any happiness that doesn't involve dams and lodges. This is why the Buddha has to convince us that this is a good thing. Part of the training he provides is to give us a new sense of possibilities. This involves training in becoming skillful in the three types of fabrication we mentioned earlier, so that we'll know them well. That's because the things you know best are the things that you've mastered as a skill.

You can see this in the way the Buddha teaches. He teaches you how to talk to yourself: where to direct your thoughts and how to evaluate things skillfully. And in his many similes, he teaches you what perceptions to hold in mind. He even teaches you how to breathe to give rise to skillful feelings of pleasure and equanimity in body and mind. In other words, he teaches you how to do all three kinds of fabrication in a skillful way.

This all comes together in the practice of concentration. You're focused on your breath, which is a bodily fabrication. You're talking to yourself about the breath, "Is it comfortable? Is it not? Is it too long? Too short? What can be done to make it more comfortable? Once it's comfortable, what can I do to spread that comfortable sensation to the body? How can I make that more permanent?" All of that is verbal fabrication. Then there are the perceptions you hold in mind: How do you picture to yourself the way the breath flows in the body? And how do you maintain those feelings of pleasure? That's mental fabrication.

This is one of the reasons why we read the suttas where the Buddha tells you how to talk to yourself and what perceptions to hold in mind. It's so that we can have an expanded sense of what our possibilities are, of what kind of present moments we can create and how we can point it in the direction of the end of suffering.

That's a general picture of the Buddha's approach. We'll go into more detail tomorrow evening. The main points to remember from tonight are the

three fabrications, the teaching about becoming, and the three types of self that you have in that state of becoming: the agent, the consumer, and the commentator. Above all, remember that the Buddha has you adopt as an absolute the desire to put an end to suffering, and that everything else should be relative to that.

Keep these points in in mind and you'll be well prepared for the rest of the retreat.

April 23, 2025, Morning

The Problem of Pain

The Buddha taught that the existence of pain is something we have to accept. Now, it's true that we can do away with some of our pains with medicine or by changing our position, but there will be other pains that we cannot avoid. And it's the case that we'll have to meet up with pain in meditation, especially as we sit still for long periods of time. You may ask, "Why do we have to put up with the pain?" Part of it is in getting the body used to sitting in this position, because it's a good position to sit in for a long period of time. It gives a balanced sense of space to all the organs in the body.

When you're not accustomed to this position, there's the initial problem that the blood in some of the major vessels in your legs or back gets blocked and pushed into the capillaries. That can be painful. But if we sit in this position long enough, the little capillaries begin to expand. Essentially, you reroute the blood down the back and the legs as the capillaries become larger vessels. So there'll be a period of pain as you're breaking the body in. With repeated practice, though, pains of this sort goes away.

However, there's another reason why we sit with pain, and that's because we need to understand how the mind relates to pain. When you figure that out, you can learn how not to suffer from pain. You get to see how your perceptions and the stories you tell yourself about the pain—your verbal and mental fabrications around it—are actually what make you suffer much more than the physical pain itself. And those are things you can change so that you don't have to suffer even when physical pain won't go away.

So even though we have to accept the fact of pain, the Buddha doesn't leave us defenseless against it. He said we have to learn, when we experience pain, how not to let it invade the mind and remain. When we can see the pain as one thing, the body as another thing, and your awareness as something separate from both, then we can be with the pain without letting it invade the mind.

The first step in this direction is to realize that the pain doesn't actually invade the mind of its own accord. We pull it in through our perceptions and thought fabrications: the images we have of pain and the stories we tell ourselves about it. So the key to keeping our minds uninvaded will be to perceive and think about the pain in new ways.

Unfortunately, the Buddha doesn't give us detailed instructions on how to do this. He does, however, note that body, feeling, perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness are all separate events. That gives us a clue as to how to take apart what seems to be a tangled mass of physical and mental pain. He also gives us a general outline of the steps for dealing with pain in the four steps of breath meditation associated with feelings as a frame of reference.

The steps are these:

- one, breathing in and out sensitive to rapture;
- two, breathing in and out sensitive to pleasure;
- three, breathing in and out sensitive to mental fabrications—in other words, the effect that feelings and perceptions have on the mind;
- and then four, breathing in and out calming that effect.

Those are the four major steps.

For more detailed instructions on how to use these steps in dealing with pain, we have to look to the teachings of the forest ajaans. There we find that Ajaan Lee focuses most on the first two of the steps, being sensitive to rapture and pleasure, although he also gets you started on the remaining two steps, being sensitive to how feelings and perceptions affect the mind and learning how to calm that effect. Ajaan Maha Bua focuses a lot of attention directly on those last two steps,

Ajaan Lee starts by saying that when there's pain in one part of the body, don't focus there. Focus instead on the parts of the body that you can make comfortable by the way you breathe, and then make those the basis for your concentration. For the time being, you can let the pains be in the other part. The image he gives is of going into a house where the floor boards have some

rotten spots. Don't lie down on the rotten spots. Lie down on the areas where the boards are sound.

Another image he gives is of eating a mango. If the mango has some rotten spots with worms, don't eat the parts with the worms. Eat just the good parts. In other words, if the pain is in your right side, focus on the left. If the pain is in the back, focus on the front. If there's pain in the legs, focus on the torso.

As for generating feelings of rapture, Ajaan Lee equates these with feelings of fullness in the body. You can do a brief experiment with this. Focus on your hands right now. Think of relaxing every little muscle in your hands so as to allow the blood vessels to be totally open, and then they'll be full of blood. As you breathe in, don't tense them up. And as you breathe out, focus on not squeezing them. After a while, there'll be a feeling of fullness in your hands. Let that feeling of fullness stay there for a while, and then think of it going up your arms. Or you can start in other parts of body, such as the little muscles around your eyes or in the middle of the chest, right at the area of the breastbone. Think of those areas being totally relaxed as you breathe in, totally relaxed as you breathe out. As you breathe in, breathe out, allow those areas to develop a sense of fullness, and then from there it can begin to expand.

That's how you become sensitive to feelings of rapture in the body. You realize that there may not be feelings of rapture when you begin, but there's a potential for a sense of rapture or fullness to develop. As for feelings of pleasure, these are feelings of ease and relaxation. The rapture is more intense, it's more full. To induce feelings of ease, think of the breathing process as being smooth and easy: Hold in mind the perception that your body is like a big sponge. When you breathe in, the breath can come in and out of the body through every pore, with nothing to obstruct it at all.

Now, once these feelings are steady, think of the good breath energy going from them through the part of the body that's in pain—and it's important that you don't stop at the pain. Often we have a subconscious sense of a wall around the pain, so you want to penetrate that wall. Suppose there's a pain in your knee. As the feelings of comfortable breath go down the leg, have them go through the knee and then out the foot. If there's a perception of a wall

around the pain, remember that even stone walls are made out of atoms, and atoms contain a lot of space. Think of the breath going through those spaces.

When you use perceptions like this, you're actually beginning to move into the third and fourth steps, being sensitive to mental fabrication and calming its effect. Another way to do this is to ask yourself if the pain was in that part of the body first, or was the breath? If your have the perception that the pain precedes the in-breath, that'll create as sense that you have to push the breath through it, and that can create more tension around the pain. Try changing the perception, telling yourself that the breath was there first, and see if that makes things easier.

Sometimes when you dissolve the walls of tension around the pain, the pain itself will actually go away or get relieved to some extent. And sometimes not. The important thing is that these steps make you more confident in the face of pain. You don't have to be afraid of the pain. You have some tools to use against it.

When I was a college student, the college allowed the psychology department to call randomly on students to do psych experiments. I was called in once for an experiment after I had learned to meditate. The experiment was this: They had you put your right hand into a pail of ice water and they said, "Imagine that the warmth in your left hand is going to warm up your right hand, and that the coolness from the right hand is going over to the left hand." So I sat there for five minutes. And they said, "Okay, you can stop now. You're breaking the curve." Most people couldn't do it for that long.

I found out later that they had divided the people coming in for the experiment into three groups. One group was told, "Keep your hand in the ice water until it gets painful, then take it out." The second group was told, "Try to keep your hand in the ice water as long as you can," but they were not given any techniques for dealing with the pain. The third group, which I was in, was given this technique to help them endure the pain.

They found that the third group in general was able to stick with the ice water much longer than the other two groups, which shows that if you have a sense that you have some tools to use against the pain, you can actually withstand the pain much more effectively.

Going back to Ajaan Lee's method: The fact that you have this comfortable spot in the body that you've been able to maintain with your breath will help you in the next step, in which you're actually going to focus directly on the pain. You know that if the pain gets too bad to deal with, you can always go back to your comfortable spot. That enables you to be even more courageous in the face of the pain. Your perceptions about the breath energy also give you some practice for the next steps, which involves exploring the relationship between the pain and your perceptions.

When you feel ready, you can attempt Ajaan Maha Bua's steps of actually investigating your perceptions around the pain. In other words, this is where we move fully into the steps of being sensitive to mental fabrications around the pain and calming those fabrications. Investigating your perceptions require your asking some strange questions. But only when you ask some strange questions will you uncover the strange attitudes you've picked up around the pain.

After all, your first experience of pain in this lifetime was before you even had language. When you were a baby, you had to deal with pain when you couldn't explain it to yourself, and nobody could explain it to you. So you probably came up with some strange images around the pain, and you may still be relating to your pain in pre-linguistic ways or with some pre-linguistic assumptions.

So, some of the questions you might ask are these: "Is the pain the same thing as the body?" In other words, if there's a pain in your knee, does the pain feel as if it's the same thing as the knee? If it does, you can remind yourself that the experience of the body is composed of the four elements of earth, water, wind, and fire: earth, solidity; water, liquid or cool sensations; wind, the feeling of energy; and fire, warmth. Actually, the pain is none of these, but we may have glommed it on, especially to the feeling of solidity. Sometimes pain feels warm, but pain and warmth are actually two separate things.

Another question you might ask is, "Does the pain have a shape?" The pain doesn't really have a shape, but it may have a shape in your mind. So question the image that "This pain right here is occupying this territory of the body."

"Does it have any bad intentions towards you?" Question that idea.

"Is the pain solid and lasting? Or does it come as individual moments, arising and passing away?" If you can see it as individual moments, then the next question is, "Are those moments coming at you? Or can you perceive them as going away from you, even as they arise?" Try to see them going away. It's like sitting in the back of a station wagon—one of those old station wagons with the back seat facing back. You're going down the road with your back toward the driver, and as soon as anything comes into the range of your vision, it's already going away.

Years back, I was in Singapore, and one of my students took me to see a Chinese doctor to treat a pain in my back. The doctor started rubbing some oil into my back, and at first it felt nice. Then he rubbed harder and harder and harder until my skin was raw. Then he took some bamboo whisks and started beating my back. My first thought was, "What bad kamma have I done to deserve this?" Then I realized he wasn't going to stop any time soon. But I also realized that if I had the perception that as soon as the bamboo whisk hit my back, the pain was already going away, it wasn't coming at me, then I found it much easier to deal with. The treatment took 10 to 15 minutes. It cured the back pain because the skin hurt so much. But I learned a good skill, and I've used it ever since.

Another question you can ask is, "Does the pain have one spot that's sharper than the others?" You find that if you start focusing on finding the sharpest point of the pain, it runs away from you. So you keep following it. You chase it here and chase it there, and in doing that, you're changing the balance of power. You're not so afraid of the pain, you're not trying to run away from it, you're no longer playing the role of a victim, so it's harder for the pain to hit you. As you do this, the pain may disappear entirely, and sometimes it disappears in really strange ways.

One time I was chasing a pain in my knee. It stayed in the knee area for a while, and then it went running up my leg into my chest and disappeared into my heart.

So sometimes the pain will disappear. But other times it will separate out. In other words, the body and the pain become separate things. It's as if the

body is here and the pain is there, an inch or so away from it. And your awareness is still something else.

This way, you learn some important lessons about the role of perception in shaping even your most basic and immediate experiences.

You also see how the Buddha's instructions on dealing with the pain parallels instructions on dealing with the mind. Remember, the steps in taking the mind as a frame of reference are: you gladden it, you concentrate it, and you release it.

Ajaan Lee's recommendations for establishing focus on parts of the body that you can make comfortable correspond to the steps of gladdening and concentrating. His instructions for using pleasure and concentration to dissolve the shell around the pain, and Ajaan Maha Bua's instructions for questioning perceptions, correspond to the step of releasing.

In this way, we can see how the Buddha's instructions for mindfulness of breathing reinforce one another for the sake of building inner strength. They focus your desire for freedom from suffering on how to deal with specific problems of pain and suffering right now, in the immediate present. In other words, his meditation instructions don't save all their rewards for the end of the path. They can help make you stronger, and they help in releasing you from individual pains, both physical and mental, right here and now.

April 23, 2025, Afternoon

Q & A

Q: What is really samādhi, if not stillness? (This person is quoting a certain ajaan he's referring to as Ajaan X.)

A: Samādhi is not only calm, but also an intense focus. The mind gathers around one object. With right concentration, you're also alert and mindful at the same time.

There are states of stillness that count as wrong concentration. Two are very common. One is called delusion concentration, in which you're focused on an object, such as the breath, and as it gets very pleasant, you drop the object and you just focus on the pleasure. You get into a state which is very pleasant, but you don't really know what your object is. It's as if you're in a pleasant fog. Sometimes you come out of that state and you ask yourself, "Was I awake or was I asleep?" It's not very clear. This is one of the obstacles that comes as the mind begins to settle down but is not yet thoroughly focused on its object.

The way around that—as the mind settles down and there's a sense of pleasure—is to tell yourself, "I'll let the pleasure do its work, while I stay focused on my breath." This is where you do things like spreading the breath sensations through the body, to make sure that the breath is connected in all parts of the body, and that all the parts, even the tiny ones, are getting nourished by the breath. In other words, you give the mind work to do. That gets you firmly established in your object.

The image I have in mind for delusion concentration is of someone on a scaffolding next to a building. A cloud comes by and it looks very comfortable, so he jumps off the scaffolding onto the cloud.

The other type of wrong concentration is called the state of non-perception, in which you refuse to focus on any object at all. If anything comes up, you let it go, let it go, let it go, let it go. You go into a state where you have

no sense of the body at all and no sense of the world outside you. There's a tiny bit of awareness. Time can pass very quickly without your realizing it. Several hours feel like just a few seconds. This is very still, but it's wrong concentration. There's no discernment, no mindfulness, no alertness at all. The weird thing about this type of concentration is that you tell yourself that you're going to get out at 10 p.m., say, and you come out right at that hour.

Q: I have trouble concentrating when I'm walking. To get my mind concentrated, I breathe in, making the breath energy come up from the foot all the way to the head in front, all the way up to the head as it's placed there. And then I make it come back down again when I make the next step. This practice necessitates that I walk very slowly, step by step, synchronizing my breath with my walking. Is this technique correct?

A: It's useful sometimes. If you find that it helps to establish concentration, then you can do that. But then once the concentration is established, try to find just one spot in the body where you stay focused, because you want to get so that you can walk without synchronizing your breath with the steps. Keep your attention there. Try to choose a spot that's least affected by the movement of the feet, because you want to get so that you can cross the street safely while you're doing walking meditation.

Q: Is it possible to be in the first jhāna, all the time, 24 hours?

A: If you're speaking, you're not in jhāna. You can listen while in jhāna, which is why people listening to the Buddha could attain awakening while listening. Someone who is skilled in jhāna can enter and leave it at will. If you live all alone, I guess you could be in jhāna all the time, but that would require a lot of skill.

Q: How do I know that the sensations I feel when I'm moving my breath through the body are a direct result of that breath, versus latent or pre-existing? Does it matter or not? If not, why not?

A: One way to test whether what you're feeling is a result of what you're doing right now is to change what you're doing. If the results change, then obviously it's a result of what you're doing right now. If it doesn't change, then it's a result of other things. But most likely you'll find, especially with the

breath, that if you change your intention for how to breathe, it'll have an immediate effect on how you experience the body.

Q: Ajaan, concerning working with pain, first, I can sit on the ground for 30 minutes before my right leg falls asleep and becomes painful. Then I can sit in a chair for an hour before pain starts, and so far, for this retreat, I've decided to use a chair.

Next bullet point, my goal would be to sit for longer periods of time on the ground.

Finally, what are your thoughts on using the retreat to work with pain, or is it a better idea to make this a long-term goal for after the retreat? Thank you.

A: I would say that you use the last session that we have in the afternoon, which is a 30-minute session, to sit on the floor. Otherwise, I would say, sit in a chair. You can use the retreat as an opportunity to work on your concentration because working with pain is best done when you have some powers of concentration. So you can make that a long-term goal. For example, one day you sit for 30 minutes, the next day you sit for 35, then 40, then 45, and so on.

Q: When in the third jhāna, I find that thinking about how I prefer equanimity to pleasure—and pain, for that matter—can get me deeper into concentration. Can this also be a way of letting go of pleasure to get into the fourth jhāna, or is it rather that the pleasure has to saturate the mind before it can let go of it, hence, one just has to have patience?

A: This will depend on the situation. If you decide that you prefer equanimity to the pleasure, things begin to calm down, and the mind stays in that deeper state, then that's fine. However, if it requires a lot of effort to make it stay in that deeper state, then it's a sign the mind is not ready for it yet. Go back to enjoy the pleasure of the state you just left.

They have stories in the forest tradition of how even Ajaan Mun found that on some days when he really wanted to get the mind really deep into concentration, it wouldn't go as deep as he wanted it to. There are times when you have to feed the mind and feed the body with pleasure before it's willing to settle down deeper. You don't have to jump through jhāna hoops.

Q: I found very useful your advice about the question of internal security, so thank you for that. But still, I'll ask about what to do when the people on whom you are very dependent approach you. Suppose one appears at work, how do you assert your desires or needs without the other one feeling aggressed against or menaced? This is the case in a professional context where there's a lot of intellectual competition.

A: You have to learn how to express your needs and desires in a non-aggressive way. There was a woman in Thailand who became Miss Thailand, and then Miss Universe. She had a reputation for saying everything with a smile. People just went along with the smile, without noticing that she was sometimes saying some pretty aggressive things. So it's a question of learning how to assert yourself without the other person feeling that you're attacking them. Look for examples.

I'll give you an example. When I first went to Thailand to stay at the monastery, there was an old monk who had ordained after retiring from government service. He liked to brag about the fact that he was totally past sexual desire, but he also liked to tell stories about his old days with prostitutes.

One day it got to me. He started telling another one of these stories, and I said, "How can you say that you're past sexual desire? This is all you talk about." Well, he blew up. Word of this got to Ajaan Fuang, and Ajaan Fuang told me, "That wasn't the most skillful way of presenting this issue. The way to say this is, 'These stories may not affect you, but I still have sexual desire, and it affects me, so could you please not tell these stories?'"

Years later, after Ajaan Fuang died and I was in charge of the monastery, we had a young monk whose mother would bring the newspaper every day. This newspaper was a tabloid called the *Daily News.* Every day, on the front page of section two, there was always a picture of a woman wearing very few clothes. And it seemed as if that page was always the one left open when the paper was left around. So I called the monks together and I said, "This may not be affecting you, but it's affecting me, okay?" That was the end of that. So, learn to be diplomatic.

Q: To desire what's beautiful or to be attracted by beauty, aesthetics: Is it unskillful? Does it necessarily lead to sensuality even when the mind thinks it recognizes the absolute?

A: What kind of absolute are we talking about here?

The Buddha said he doesn't condemn all beauty, all sensual pleasures. You have to judge these things by the effect that they have on your mind. If you find that a particular pleasure gives rise to more unskillful qualities in the mind, then you have to renounce that pleasure. But if it doesn't have that effect, then it's okay. But this is an area where you have to be very honest with yourself.

The Canon gives examples of innocent pleasures, like the beauty of nature, and the pleasure that comes from living in a harmonious community or in seclusion. These pleasures are usually okay across the board. Other pleasures, as long as they don't involve breaking the precepts, are an individual matter. You have to observe yourself in all honesty.

Q: When I listen to a podcast, read fiction, or watch a film, I don't feel suffering. What are the downsides of these strategies, given that, on the path, one continues to feel suffering unless one reaches the very end of the path?

A: Test yourself: Can you watch that film repeatedly for 24 hours? Can you listen to that podcast again and again and again for 24 hours? After a while, it really isn't pleasurable anymore. In other words, these are ways of making you insensitive to whether suffering really is occurring in your mind. It's better to be really clear to yourself about what's actually going on in the mind and what levels of stress are there, even in those experiences. Also, try to cultivate the pleasures that are part of the path because those pleasures actually make you more sensitive to what's really going on inside your body and inside your mind.

Once, when I first went back to America, I was on a plane with Ajaan Suwat. We were in a row of three seats, and the man sitting in the window seat must have noticed, "Oh, these are Buddhist monks." Without saying hello or anything, he turned to us and said, "I'm not suffering." Then he proceeded to tell us about his life. He lived in Blythe, California, which is right in the middle of the hottest part of the American desert. He ran a car dealership, he had a son who was in jail and a daughter who had given birth to a cocaine baby that

he and his wife had to raise because the daughter was on drugs. He kept saying, “But I’m not suffering,” yet you could tell that he was in denial.

So it’s very easy to deny your suffering. It’s better to get sensitive to what suffering there is, even in some pleasures.

Q: I have a doubt about my comprehension of your teaching about the process that leads to fabrications. From what I understand, one, the mind and craving are the origin of suffering. Two, the mind and desire give the impulse that sets this process of fabrication in motion. Three, fabrications then produce the material for desire. And four, desire is at the start of all our experiences and of becoming. Is this correct, or is it so that, on the contrary, desire and the need for becoming are giving rise to desire?

A: This is not a strictly linear process, in which A causes B, and B causes C. There are actually many feedback loops in which B or C can turn around and influence A, and C can influence B. In other words, there are the desires that will give the impulse to fabrication, and the fabrications that produce the materials from which you excite more desires. Sometimes you have the fabrications giving rise to becoming. Then you can develop some desires around your sense of self or the world in that state of becoming, that will give rise to more fabrications.

Now, these feedback loops are not a deterministic circle. They can be cut with awareness, alertness, ardency, mindfulness, wisdom, and discernment. But there is one caveat, which is that if a state of becoming has already arisen, don’t try to destroy that state of becoming, because that becomes a desire for non-becoming, which is also a cause of suffering. What you have to do is go back and find the process that leads to the next state of becoming, and then abort that process through dispassion. That’s how you get free from becoming.

Q: What about saṅkhāras? I have physical pains. Are they related to my past actions?

A: Saṅkhāras are basically intentional actions. The action itself, and then what is produced by the action, are both called saṅkhāras. What’s important about saṅkhāras is that they contain an intentional element.

As for your physical pains, they come from a combination of past actions and present actions. The present actions are those three kinds of saṅkhāras, or fabrications, that we talked about earlier: bodily, which is the breath; verbal, which is directed thought and evaluation, the way you talk to yourself; and then mental, which is feelings and perceptions. As we practice, we focus on getting more skillful at doing these types of fabrications in the present moment.

Q: Yesterday's talk about dependent co-arising raised the question of free will versus determinism. Please comment.

A: The Buddha's teaching on causality is a combination of two principles.

The first principle is diachronic, causation over time. In other words, an action happens now, and then the effect will come along sometime later. The second principle, though, is synchronic, in which the action happens now, and the consequence happens right at the same time. When the cause disappears, the effect disappears immediately. Our life is a combination of these two principles, and it turns out that without our present-moment contribution, we wouldn't even experience the results of past actions. So both are required for the experience of the present moment. But it's important to note that your present-moment decisions are not necessarily determined by the past.

So there is an element of conditionality coming from the past, but there's also an element of freedom in your present choices. It's because of this freedom that we focus on the present moment as we meditate, because what you do in the present moment is going to make a difference between whether you suffer from past actions or not.

In short, there is some determinism, but it's not total determinism, and there is some room for free will.

Q: The desire of the bodhisattva is an admirable one: to help in the liberation of beings from saṁsāra. If the choice of becoming a bodhisattva is determined in previous lives, may one by power of free will change it and walk the path of arahantship? How to know it?

A: There's the story of Ajaan Mun and Ajaan Sao. It's a well-known story in the forest tradition that after Ajaan Mun became a non-returner, he wondered why his teacher, Ajaan Sao, had not yet attained any of the noble attainments. He saw in his meditation that Ajaan Sao in a previous lifetime had made a vow to become a Private Buddha. So Ajaan Mun told him about this. Ajaan Sao felt daunted by the amount of time it would take to become a Private Buddha, so he renounced the vow and soon later he became an arahant.

So, the short answer to that question is, Yes, you can renounce vows like that because there is that element of free will for everybody.

April 23, 2025, Evening

Determined on Freedom

To review some of the points from last night: A large part of the solution of the problem of desire is to bring some order to them. You focus on the best possible thing to desire, and then bring everything else in line with that, including your sense of who you are and what you're capable of doing. This approach also involves establishing a firm set of values, so that your judgments of specific desires can all refer to the same set of standards. If this overriding desire is to stay in control, you need a firm determination that you've clearly articulated to yourself. Otherwise, new desires will wash it away.

The best possible thing to be determined on is total liberation from suffering and from constraints of every kind. And you want a happiness that's totally harmless. So when you take on the Buddha's path, you make freedom and harmlessness your highest values.

The Buddha stresses the importance of freedom in the simile he most often uses as the name of his goal: *nibbāna* or unbinding.

The image of nibbāna, the extinguishing of a fire, has to be understood in light of how the workings of fire were understood at the time. They thought that the fire element existed in a latent form in all things. When you provoked it, as when using a fire stick, it would cling to a piece of fuel and burst into flame. Notice: It latched on to the fuel. The fuel didn't cling to it. When the fire went out, it let go of the fuel and was released. When it was released, it couldn't be located as having gone east, west, north or south.

In the same way, the mind is trapped, not by the things it clings to, but by its own act of clinging. When it lets go of its clingings, it's released and cannot be classified as existing, non-existing, both, or neither. So to be determined on nibbāna means to be determined on total freedom, even from space and time.

This determination involves four mental qualities: discernment, truth, relinquishment, and calm. These mental qualities, pertain both to the goal and to the way to the goal. In other words, the goal is the highest expression of these four, and the way to the goal requires that you develop all four in your practice.

When they're defined in terms of the goal:

- The discernment that lets go of defilements is the highest noble discernment.
- The truth of nibbāna, which is undeceptive, is the highest noble truth.
- The relinquishment of passion, aversion, and delusion is the highest noble relinquishment.
- And the calm that comes from being free from passion, aversion, and delusion is the highest noble calm.

Notice that even on the level of the goal, there is a hierarchy among these four qualities. Discernment and relinquishment, working together, are the last steps leading to the goal. Truth and calm are attributes of the goal itself.

When these determinations are defined as qualities to develop along the path, they're expressed as imperatives:

- Don't neglect discernment.
- Guard the truth.
- Be committed to relinquishment.
- And train only for calm.

Let's take these one by one.

• First: Don't neglect discernment. Usually we think of Buddhist wisdom as being abstract and paradoxical, focused on concepts like emptiness and not-self, but it starts out with three very simple propositions.

a) The first is the question, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" The wisdom here lies in seeing that your happiness

has to come from your actions; long-term happiness is possible; and it's preferable to short-term.

This question also establishes the framework for later parts of the path. As you practice and start getting results from your actions, you have to ask yourself if the results are good enough to be identified as the goal. When the Buddha talked about the secrets of how he gained awakening, one was that he didn't rest content with skillful qualities—to say, nothing of unskillful qualities. As long as there was still some suffering left in his mind, he wouldn't rest until he could get rid of it.

Here he taught three perceptions as kind of a litmus test for testing if something qualifies as the goal.

You may have heard of these three perceptions: the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. They correspond to the terms of the original question: In other words, if something is inconstant, it's not happy. If it's inconstant, it's not long-term. And if it's neither happy nor long-term, it's not worth claiming as you or yours. That's how you use those three perceptions: to test whether something you attain is really worth being satisfied with.

That's the first principle of wisdom: We're acting for our long-term welfare and happiness.

Now, if this sounds selfish, remember that if your happiness depends on harming others, they won't stand to see that happiness last. This means that the notion of your long-term welfare and happiness has to include goodwill and compassion for others. The emphasis on long-term happiness also means that genuine discernment, instead of focusing exclusively on the present moment, takes the future into consideration as well, as you keep in mind the long-term consequences of what you're doing in the present moment.

This fact is reflected in the passages where the Buddha talks about focusing on what needs to be done right now, here in the present moment. He never says that the present moment has any independent value. It's not wonderful in and of itself. In every case, the passages that extol focusing on the present come in the context of his discussions of mindfulness of death. Given that you could die at any moment, you should do what you can right now to master the skills you'll need to handle death well.

That's the first principle of discernment.

b) The second principle is a corollary of the first. If long-term happiness requires abandoning your short-term happiness, you're willing to abandon the short-term. It's a basic principle that if you're going to win at chess, you have to be willing to lose some of your pieces. This means that discernment involves relinquishment. That's why these two determinations go together. You have to be discerning enough to let go of anything that gets in the way of true happiness.

c) The third principle for wisdom or discernment focuses on four types of actions. Two of them are no-brainers: The first is an action you like to do and gives good results. The second is an action you don't like to do and gives bad results. Those are easy. Things you like to do and give good results, you do them. Things you don't like to do and give bad results, you're not going to do them.

The difficult ones are the next two: the actions you like to do but will give bad long-term results, and then the actions you don't like to do but will give good long-term results. These two options require some psychological insight. You have to know how to make yourself want to do what's in your long-term welfare and happiness, and to want *not* to do the things that will lead to long-term harm. In other words, you have to know how to psych yourself out.

To talk yourself into doing things you ordinarily don't like to do but you know will be for your benefit, your discernment has to be pragmatic. It also has to know how to be persuasive, in other words, teaching the members of your inner committee to want to do what's in their best interest. This is where having a strong sense of values is an important part of the path. This will involve all three types of fabrication that we discussed on the first night, especially verbal fabrication, which is how you talk to yourself. We'll focus more on this topic tomorrow evening.

To be negligent of discernment would be to say, "I don't care about the long-term results of my actions. I'll just go for what I want right now." Suppose you tell yourself, "If you drink tonight, you're going to have a hangover tomorrow." Neglecting discernment would mean responding, "I

don't care." Not neglecting discernment means caring about the long-term consequences of what you do. It's not focused just on your awareness of the present moment. It's sensitive to the fact that the present moment is something you're actively shaping, and the way you shape it will have long-term consequences, so you want to shape it well.

That's the first of the determinations.

• The second determination, guarding the truth, means being very clear about what you base your opinions about the truth on: things like hearsay, tradition, reasoning, logic, or direct experience. Of the possible bases for your opinions, the Buddha says that only direct experience is reliable, and your direct experience is reliable only when you yourself become a reliable person. So truth is a matter not only of intellectual honesty but also of personal integrity. Intellectual honesty means basically reporting the truth. Integrity means you're really honest with yourself about what you're doing and what the results are, and you try to act responsibly.

Guarding the truth means that if you know that your opinions are not based on direct experience, you have to keep your mind open to learning new things in your practice. It also means you should be scrupulous in examining the beliefs you already hold on to, or that you're thinking of adopting. That's the second determination.

• The third determination is being committed to relinquishment. This means finding joy in abandoning any attachments that weigh down the mind and—once you've abandoned them—finding joy in letting them go for good. This element of joy is an important part of the practice. One of the topics later on in the retreat will be the types of delight the Buddha advises you to foster as you're practicing.

This is the kind of joy that comes from mastering a skill. On the outer level, relinquishment means being generous with your material possessions, your energy, your knowledge, your time, and your forgiveness. On the inner level, it means learning to stop identifying with any members of your inner committee that will resist following the path. This joy is what gives you energy as you practice.

• The fourth determination is training only for calm. This means abandoning anything within or without that disturbs the mind. This doesn't mean that you abandon your responsibilities, but it does mean that you don't take on any unnecessary burdens. As the Buddha said, if you're wise, you know which duties fall to you, and you fulfill those duties. You also know which duties don't fall to you, and so you don't take them on.

In the beginning stages of the practice, you focus on eliminating disturbances within or without that would pull you off the path. As the path develops, you begin to focus on disturbances within the path itself, and you let them go progressively, as you don't need them.

That's the fourth determination.

It's worth noting that on this level of development of the four determinations, as qualities strengthened through practice, three of them—discernment, truthfulness, and relinquishment—function as means. Calm, even here, is a quality for whose sake you train. That's because inner calm is totally safe. No one else can take it from you, and no one even has to know that you have it.

All four of these determinations are covered by discernment. You see the long-term benefits that come from guarding the truth, being committed to relinquishment, and training for calm. You make a point of learning the lessons on how to get better and better at developing these qualities, and then you apply those lessons to further your practice.

By developing these four qualities in these ways, you can overcome desires that are ignorant, deceptive, grasping, or agitated. In other words, you do your best to overcome:

one, desires that aim primarily at immediate gratification, that are complacent, or that ignore long-term consequences;

two, desires that lie to you—in other words, that promise results they can't fulfill.

The third type of desire that you overcome are those that aim at acquiring more wealth and power over others, or that always want to make a profit over other people. Instead of seeing the value of relinquishment, you want more and more and more—like some politicians.

The fourth type of desires that you overcome are those that aim at gaining things that you would have to fight to protect. In other words, things that would make you fearful that you would lose what you've got, as when you work to acquire wealth and then have to hire armed guards to protect the wealth and yourself.

At the same time as you're developing these four determinations, you're also going against many of the common habits that the world at large uses in pursuing its desires, such as the habit of going for quick results without thought for the long-run consequences—like the American approach to business.

The second habit would be the habit of using deceit when you can't get what you want through honest means.

The third would be the habit of accumulating as much as you can.

And then the determination on calm overcomes the habit of looking for happiness in variety, excitement, and change for the sake of change.

In an image that's frequently used in the Canon, when you take on the practice, you stop flowing along with the passions of the world. Instead, you go against the stream, even when it's hard. It's hard because the desires that go against the four determinations don't give in easily. After all, they've been in charge of your mind for who knows how many eons. And just because these desires are ignorant doesn't mean they're not clever. They can easily have you fooled, and they *have* had you fooled for a long, long time.

They can even quote the Dhamma to their own purposes when they want to. For example, they'll tell you that by fighting them, you strengthen them, so you should just avoid challenging them. Or they might tell you that because contentment is a virtue, it's best to accept them and be at peace with them. Or they may tell you that because the goal is without effort or desire, you can get there by exerting no effort or desire. All these ideas are a fake Dhamma, and they're especially dangerous because they're so attractive.

The Buddha, however, never shied away from the fact that the practice will involve an internal battle. This is why he used so many martial analogies to rouse the monks to be up for the fight, to help them find joy in their struggle to master the skills of the path.

For example, he compares the practice to a fortress on a frontier. Mindfulness is like a gatekeeper who knows how to recognize the enemies—in other words, your unskillful mental qualities—and how to keep them from entering the fortress. Your persistence is like the soldiers who defend the fortress. Learning the Dhamma is like providing the soldiers with weapons. There's an important parallel between a meditator and a soldier. Because the mind changes directions so quickly, especially when it meets with internal resistance, you need to be trained to stick with the path and to see it all the way through, just as a soldier needs to be trained to stay in the battle despite the hardships involved.

The training the Buddha offers in this direction is two-fold, from without and from within.

Because you're starting from ignorance, you need training from other people, those who are already more advanced in the path than you are. These people are not only capable of giving you instruction when you need it, but they can also rouse, urge, and encourage you when you don't feel up for the fight. These in fact are precisely the verbs that the Canon uses to describe how the Buddha teaches his students and how his students teach their students.

Unlike the other schools of the time that taught the powerlessness of human action, the Buddha, in teaching the power of human action, can provide a complete course of training. He would inform his students of the possibility and desirability of taking on the training, and also fire their hearts to exercise the power of their own actions as far as possible.

That's the training from without.

You also need training from within, because the actual battle is inside your own heart and mind. It's a battle that only you can fight. This means that you have to be alert to what's happening in your mind from moment to moment, to see how and where the battle lines have shifted. To deal effectively with your inner battles, you can't simply internalize general lessons from outside. You also need to develop your own powers of observation and your own ingenuity to generate specific solutions to specific internal problems on time.

This aspect of the training requires a strong sense of self, one that is both responsible and capable. You need this strong healthy sense of self because

you're fighting off the defilements that you've identified with in the past. You need a new "you" to resist the habits of your old "you's." As you get more and more adept at developing a skillful sense of yourself, it fades more and more into the background, so that you can focus specifically on the actions and skills you're training in.

There are times in the practice when you're like an athlete who feels "in the zone." Everything goes as you want it to, so there's no sense of any obstruction. And when there's no sense of obstruction, there's no sense of self. This, by the way, is not the goal, although it's an important part of the path leading to the goal.

That's the training from within.

Both sides of the training rely on the first two determinations: discernment and truth, in their more rudimentary forms of being observant and honest. In receiving training from others, you have to observe clearly what's going on in your mind and in your behavior in general, so that you can report honestly to those who are training you. That way, those who train you can trust you and can be genuinely helpful in giving advice. In training yourself, you have to be observant and honest about what you're doing and the results you're getting from your actions. In particular, you have to pay attention to what's working and what's not working in abandoning unskillful desires. In that way, you can solve problems quickly. At the same time, you can keep your own unskillful desires from pulling the wool over your eyes.

When you become truthful and discerning in these ways, you have a good foundation for developing the other two determinations: relinquishment and calm. That's why the Buddha didn't teach only people who were peaceful and unburdened already. But it's also why he noted clearly that not everyone could be trained. As the chant of his virtues says, he was the tamer of those fit to be tamed. Only if someone were honest and observant would he be willing to take that person on as a student to be trained. Here it's important to keep in mind, though, that regardless of your past, you can make yourself into that person, through being as honest and observant as you can.

April 24, 2025, early morning

This morning for some variety, we're going to have a guided bone meditation. But first, there were two questions that came in late yesterday afternoon: Two people having problems with what happens to their bodies when they focus too intensely on their body. I'd like to address those problems first. In one case, when they focused on the body, they would get bad headaches. The other person would have an intense feeling of heat. Now, these sensations can come from different things. For those who have those problems, I'd like to recommend one technique first to see if that helps. Often this kind of problem comes when your focus is too intense and tight around the spot where you're focused, so you have to develop a more relaxed focus. In other words, wherever you're focused in the body, try to release any tension you feel in that part of the body. Any tension that appears, think of it scattering or dispersing, especially from the spot where you're focused.

If you still have this problem with heat or headaches, there are other ways of dealing with them, but try this one first.

April 24, 2025, Morning

Sensual Desire & Ill Will

Two days ago, we were talking about how to deal with distractions that can get in the way of establishing mindfulness and getting the mind in concentration. We noted the Buddha's five strategies for dealing with distractions in general:

> one, simply dropping them and returning to the theme of your meditation;
> two, focusing on the drawbacks of whatever has you distracted;
> three, ignoring the distraction;
> four, relaxing any physical tension that accompanies the distraction; and
> five, using mental force to keep the distraction out of the mind.

We also noted though that in addition to these general strategies, the Buddha taught specific techniques for dealing with the specific distractions that most often get in the way of concentration. These distractions are called hindrances, and there are five types: sensual desire, ill will, sloth and drowsiness, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt.

Today, I'd like to talk about some of the specific strategies for dealing with the first two of these five hindrances: sensual desire and ill will. You'll notice that most of these techniques are applications of the first two of the Buddha's main strategies, focusing on the drawbacks of the hindrances and then replacing them with better topics to focus on. We focus on their drawbacks so that we'll actively want to overcome them. Only when there's this desire will the various strategies work. If you like your hindrances, you'll probably sabotage whatever strategies the Buddha recommends for overcoming them. But if you want to get past them because you see how they place limitations on your mind, then the strategies will have a chance.

It's important to note that when we try to overcome these hindrances, we're not trying to uproot them once and for all. So don't worry. We're not trying to get you to renounce sensuality and ill will once and for all by the end of the day. We're here simply trying to get into concentration and stay there, so our immediate aims are more modest. We're just trying to clear the hindrances out of the way temporarily, so that we can have some space in the mind to establish mindfulness and concentration.

The contemplations here are meant to make you *want* to get past these hindrances. For many people, that's quite an accomplishment right there, because there are voices in the mind that want to enjoy sensual desire or ill will or anger. So our main focus here is to get you to see that it would be good to get past these hindrances at least for the time being.

A lot of the contemplations here will focus on the drawbacks of the hindrances, so that you can begin to abandon your allegiance to them and be more true in your allegiance to the voices in the mind that want to settle down and find some inner peace.

In focusing on the drawbacks of these hindrances, the Buddha also brings in another strategy: trying to locate their allure—what it is about them that part of your mind finds attractive. If you can't see the allure clearly, then no matter how much you can focus on the drawbacks, you'll still fall for the allure when your resolve weakens. The allure likes to lurk in the secret parts of your mind. It exercises its power with a whispering campaign. Only when you can locate the allure and see how stupid it is will you be able to resist it.

• For instance, with sensual desire: When talking about sensuality, the Buddha means not so much sensual pleasures as it means our fascination with thinking about them, planning them, remembering them. That's what you're really addicted to. And that's what destroys right concentration. How long does it take to eat a pizza? Not long. But you think about pizza for hours. The same with sex: It doesn't take that long, but we're so used to seeing these fantasies as attractive that we take them for granted and can spend hours with them.

So the Buddha provides some strong medicine to call the allure into question. His basic strategy is to focus first on the unattractive side of the

object of our sensual fantasies, and then on the unattractive side of our desire to fantasize itself.

With food he has you contemplate the more unattractive side of what you're eating. He starts with where it comes from. It comes from the soil, the flesh of dead animals. Or with cheese, it's the glandular secretions of goats, cows, and sheep.

Then he has you think about what happens to it when it goes into your mouth and when it comes out the other end. Our body is strange. It cannot absorb nourishment directly from the delicious food on the plate. It has to transform it with its digestive juices into something that we would never put into our mouths. Yet only then can it absorb it in the dark tunnels of your digestive system.

When you've thought about that, then you can think about all the things we tend to do to satisfy our fantasies about how food should taste and the lengths we go to in order to satisfy our fantasies. And then it all goes down the toilet.

The same with our fascination with the human body, the extent to which we feel pride over our body or lust for another body. The Buddha has us contemplate what's inside the body: all its various organs. He has you imagine taking them out of the body, as you would take rice or beans out of a sack, and contemplate them one by one until you can see that there's nothing really worth feeling pride or lust about.

For example, if we all took our livers out and put them on the stage in front of us here, no one would be interested in seeing who had the prettiest liver. So why is it that we can visualize this and yet so easily forget it and start feeling pride and lust all over again? It's because we *want* to feel the lust and we *want* to feel the pride. This is where you have to look at your desire for sensual fantasies and see that it, too, is unattractive.

The Buddha gives many analogies here. Sensual fantasies are like a dog chewing on a bone without any meat. It gets no nourishment and—as Ajaan Lee liked to point out—the only taste it gets is the taste of its own saliva.

Sensual fantasies are like a dream. When you wake up, the beautiful things you saw in the dream are gone.

At the same time, when you act on your sensual fantasies, you're putting yourself in danger. You're like a hawk with a piece of meat. Other hawks and ravens will follow you and try to tear it away from you, even to the point of killing you. To satisfy those fantasies requires the cooperation of other people, which they can withdraw at any time. The Buddha gives the analogy of a man who's borrowed a chariot and ornaments from other people and goes around displaying them as if they were his own. If the owners see him, they can take those things back at any time, and the man has no grounds to complain.

Now, the mind resists this kind of contemplation, but that's precisely where you've got to look: where it resists. What is it trying to protect as it resists this? That's where you'll find the allure. And you know that the allure will have to be something fleeting and basically stupid or childish. Otherwise, you wouldn't have to protect it and conceal it so much.

Sometimes the allure is in the image you have of yourself as you think of sensual pleasure: the role you play in that fantasy or the very fact that you can fantasize, the pride that you can have in the thought, "I can think of all kinds of sensual pleasures," the pride in yourself in being discerning in your choice of pleasures or the power of your imagination to imagine new sensual pleasures.

But is it worth all the suffering it entails? If this were all the world has to offer, you could argue that it would have to be worth it. But the Buddha's offering us something much better. So why don't you give his teachings a try?

When you can think in this way, you might be willing to attack things right at the allure. If you're engaging in a fantasy, try to do what the psychologists call "poisoning the fantasy." If the allure is in the pride, try to think of someone in the fantasy secretly despising you. Or if you're fantasizing about food: You're going to a one-Michelin-star restaurant. It turns out that the chef wanted three stars, so for revenge in not getting the rating he wanted, he's become unhinged. He's putting garbage in the food and then disguising it with spices and herbs.

They tell a story of the period after World War II in Japan. The Americans occupation forces would go to Japanese restaurants, and the Japanese chefs

would put human excrement in the food and then disguise it with spices and offer it to the Americans.

These are some of the ways of thinking yourself out of your sensual desires. If you can laugh at your sensual fantasies, that will get you out of them at least long enough for the mind to return to concentration.

• As for ill will, the Buddha employs many strategies for getting rid of it. Ill will is not simple anger. It's the anger that comes with a desire to see somebody suffer. We can often dress up our ill will by telling ourselves that it's justified, that the person has really done something bad and deserves to suffer for it. Then justice can be done.

So here the Buddha has you question both your anger and your ideas of justice.

With the anger, he first points out that you tend to do stupid things when you're angry. The mind gets tunnel vision, and what looks right when you're angry often harms you. When the anger goes, the range of your vision widens and you see the harm that you've done. Yet no amount of regret can go back and undo that harm. So in the midst of anger, you have to develop some mindfulness. Remember the stupid things you've done under the force of anger in the past. Then restrain yourself from doing or saying anything until you can get your anger under control. This way, you see that it's in your own best interest to try to overcome your anger so that you can think clearly about the situation and come up with an effective response. Then you're ready to look more objectively at the situation in ways that can calm the anger down.

One way is to look at the good things that that other person has done in the past. The Buddha has an image that you can try to use in this case. You're going through the desert. You're hot, tired, trembling with thirst. You come across a cow's footprint with a little bit of water in it. You realize if you tried to scoop up the water with your hand, you'd make it muddy. So you have to get down on all fours and slurp up the water. You wouldn't want anyone to come along and take a picture of you at that point and put it on Facebook or Instagram, but you realize this is what you have to do. Don't let your pride get in the way of your nourishment.

In the same way, if you're angry at somebody, you might think that it's demeaning to think of their good traits. But you remember you have to need their goodness because when you can't see the goodness of other people, it's very hard for you to encourage goodness within yourself.

So you need the water of other people's goodness to nourish the water of your own goodness. Otherwise, you find yourself mistreating them very easily.

If you can't see anything good about the other person, then you have to feel compassion for him. He's creating a lot of bad kamma, but his bad kamma is not going to pull you down into hell. It'll pull you down only if you mistreat him. The image the Buddha gives here is going through the desert and finding a sick person on the side of the road. No matter who the person is or what the person has done, you feel compassion.

As for your sense of justice, ideas of justice work only if you know the beginning and the end of the story. Then you can tally up who did what, who was the first to misbehave or to overreact to the actions of the other party. Your ability to tally up an accurate score is what makes you feel that your ideas about justice are objective. But in the world of rebirth, where we're constantly changing roles as we go from one life to another, where did the story begin? Any score that you might keep is only partial.

In a case like this, the Buddha says the only way out of the samsaric mudslinging is to forgive the other person and extend him goodwill. You don't have to love the other person. Just decide that you're not going to harm him. That's the only way that these things will end.

Then you have to look for the allure of the anger. One, it gives you a sense of power. Sometimes you feel that it frees you from inhibitions. But you have to remember that when you're angry, as I said, you get tunnel vision, so you don't really see the picture clearly. You lose your sense of shame and compunction. The allure of ill will is in the belief that your sense of justice is objective. But when you can see that the allure is lying to you, and that you can actually think more clearly and effectively when you're not angry, you'll be more willing to stop identifying with the anger and actually want to get past it.

As I said earlier, these approaches are not meant for you to give up sensuality or ill will once and for all. If you think you're being asked to do that,

part of the mind will rebel. You're simply being asked to put these emotions down for the time being, and give your desire for mental calm and concentration a chance to succeed. When you become more and more a master of your concentration, the pleasure and sense of inner well-being will affect a change in your mind. And you'll look more favorably at any contemplation that can enable you to experience greater freedom and peace.

April 24, 2025, Afternoon

Q & A

We'll start with two questions asking for more instructions on walking meditation.

When you meditate while you're walking, you can choose as your object either the steps of the feet or your breath. There's no need to try to coordinate the two. Determine your path. Each time you walk down the path, start out with your intention very firm: You're going to stay either with the breath or with your feet, and you're going to stay with that intention all the way to the end of the path. You're not going to think about anything beyond that one walk down the path. Then when you get to the other end, stop, turn around, and then make up your mind you're going to stay with your object all the way to the other end of the path.

If you're focusing on your breath, try to focus on a part of the body that moves as little as possible in the process of walking—for example, the middle of the chest or the middle of the head. If you're going to stay with your feet, make sure that you have a meditation word to go with the steps of the feet. "Buddho" is a common one. "Buddho" means "awake." When you put one foot on the ground, think, "Bud." When you put the other foot down, think, "-dho." "Bud-dho, Bud-dho." If you don't like "Buddho," choose another word. Or you can think, "left, right." Anything you like. That's basically it.

Q: I meditate more easily in a spacious space where my mind is able to relax better. But when I'm with a group, like right now, my breathing becomes less fluid and I feel agitated energies around me. So would you have advice on how to stay calm and concentrated while meditating with a lot of people?

A: Basically, erase the perception of a lot of people. Remember that all atoms have a lot of space in them. The people all around you are made of

atoms and are full of space. So think of the space around you penetrating everybody and extending outside, through the walls of the building.

It's not a false perception. There's a lot of space in here. Just focus on that, and then you can focus on your breath, breathing in and out through that enormous space.

Q: How should one deal with persistent or long-term tension in the face and the throat? It feels like blocked energy and it's very strong. Sometimes it can feel overwhelming. I'm wondering how much attention to give it. Should I go into it as long as it isn't overwhelming?

A: When you have patterns of tension like this, there are various ways to deal with them. One is that you can breathe around them. The other is to think of the breath energy going directly into them from all directions as you breathe in, and then out in all directions as you breathe out. As long as it's not overwhelming, then you can sit with it that way. If it does feel overwhelming, then focus on another part of the body.

Q: How to create joy during meditation?

A: Every time you feel tempted to go for a distraction, and you don't go for it, take some pride in that fact: "I beat that one defilement." Or if you have a tendency, after three breaths, to go wandering, and then you actually make it to five or six, pat yourself on the back.

In other words, you're working on a skill, and the only way you can develop a skill is to take pride in each little step forward. Ajaan Maha Bua would talk about seeing one little fleck of bark fall off the tree of your defilements and taking pride in that fact. Each little piece is worth it.

Q: Can you please come back to the four stages that you mentioned and say again in what context they should be used? One, locate the area. Two, notice how it feels. Three, notice perceptions. And four, release. Thank you.

A: These are the four steps to use when you're making a survey of the body as you're doing breath meditation.

• Locate the particular part of the body that you're going to focus on, and ask yourself, "Exactly where do I feel that right now?"

• The second step is to watch it for a while to see how it feels as you breathe in and breathe out.

• The third step is to try to breathe in a way that feels comfortable there.

• And then four, if you feel any tension or tightness in that part of the body, allow it to relax. If you're doing anything to maintain or increase that tension, then you stop doing it.

Q: You talked today about the blood that can stagnate after being in a certain position for a while. I rarely sit with my legs crossed because I feel that after 20 minutes, one foot doesn't receive blood anymore, and since there exist other positions to meditate in, and because I'm concerned about this effect when it happens, sincerely concerned about my foot, I never sit with crossed legs. For me, this pain is different from back pain. I'm not scared that it will harm my back. Do you advise to do it anyway and learn how to deal with this pain and concerns?

A: These feet have fallen asleep every now and then for 55 years and they still work. But as for getting used to the pain of sitting in cross-legged, I would say it depends on how old you are. If you're young, it's good to learn how to break in the body like this. As you get older, it's harder and harder for the body to break in. It doesn't really hurt the feet that much. The advantage of having this position is that you can sit and meditate anywhere. You walk around, you see a nice rock on the ground, and you can sit right down. You don't have to go back and get your cushion or your bench.

Q: How do we know which type of pain to endure?

A: If you have any long-term injury, try to sit with it only if it doesn't aggravate the injury. But if you find, when getting up from meditation, that you have to hobble around for ten minutes, it's a sign that you've overdone your endurance of pain. The position is not right for you.

Q: This question is a long description of how the meditation goes really bad and then it goes really well. You go through a really bad period, you go for a walking meditation, you come back and it's really great, and the next day it starts up again. What to do?

A: Welcome to meditation. This is the way it is when you start out: You're finding your way. The important thing is that when it seems really bad, remind yourself it's going to get good after a while, so don't get depressed, don't get discouraged, stick with it. When it goes well, don't get complacent. When you come out of a good session, try to remember where you were focused and how you were breathing, and see if you can recreate those conditions with your next meditation. And if the mind is in a good space when the meditation ends, see if you can maintain that mind state as you get up and walk around.

Q: In your last book, *Beyond Desire & Passion*, in the chapter, "Other Maps of Concentration," you mentioned visual experience of light and forms as a door for jhāna and then insight. May I tune into these forms, using this technique to merge or to absorb into them?

These forms of light are constantly changing, until a spectacle of light, a *nimitta*, becomes stable. Inattention and sloth are a major current obstacle for me, I guess. Lights, forms appear spontaneously in normal life, in any situation. How to work on it?

A: If you have light happening in your meditation, try to see if you can get it under control. If it's changing, try to see if you can make it stable. And if it's some other color, try to make it white or off-white. Once it's white, then ask yourself, "Can I make it go away? Can I make it reappear?" Make it go far away, make it come close up. If it's totally under your control like this, then bring it into the body. It'll bring a great sense of refreshment. If you cannot control it, let it go.

Q: The first day you told us about a piece of advice you gave to a mother who didn't have time to meditate, to really be concentrated on the things she is doing. Can this have the same effect as sitting meditation?

A: It doesn't have the same effect, but it's better than nothing. The best thing to do is, if your child gives you five minutes of free time, take five minutes of free time to sit and meditate.

Q: Skillful desires, including the one to put an end to suffering: Are they forms of craving that lead to suffering? Or are there two different types of desires?

A: All desire involves some sort of stress. Some desires are stressful and don't accomplish anything. There are other desires that involve some stress but they actually lead to the end of stress. We're trying to focus on that second type of desire here. Once those desires have done their work, then you can let them go, too.

Q: The life cycle of desire: How does it relate to the three types of fabrication? How does it work? Could you expand on that? From initiation to production to execution and to ending desire.

A: It's not really a cycle. What you have with every moment is raw material coming in from your past actions, and the mind is very busy trying to create an experience out of that raw material. Then it has to cast that experience aside to focus on the next shipment of raw material. It's like an artisan who makes something very quickly and tosses it aside, makes something very quickly and tosses it aside.

As we're meditating, we're trying to get to do one thing repeatedly for a while so that we can actually see this process of desire and fabrication as it's happening.

Q: In what way does desire, whether it's skillful or unskillful, relate to what is moral or immoral? Is the distinction something sociological, which means culturally defined? And in that case, in what way can skillful desire, in accordance with how Buddhism defines it, be universal with regards to the Indian origins of Buddhism?

A: Of the five precepts, four are totally universal: the precepts against killing, stealing, lying, and taking intoxicants. The one that does have a little bit of cultural definition has to do with the one about illicit sex. What type of relationships are considered normal and legal in a particular culture: That's what is defined as okay in terms of the five precepts. For example, in some cultures, one man can have many wives and in another culture he can't. So if you're in a culture like that, then if you have many husbands or many wives, it would be okay. You would not break the precept.

But killing is killing all over the world. Lying is lying. Taking alcohol hinders your mindfulness, even in France.

However, it's important to note that when the Buddha defined what is skillful and unskillful, the distinction was based on what leads to the end of suffering and what forms an obstacle to the end of suffering. That's not based on culture. It's based on noticing the effect that your actions have on your ability to develop concentration and discernment. The Buddha offers a course of training for putting an end to suffering, and you can best judge whether it works by taking it on, as a working hypothesis, as best you can.

Q: If suffering comes from desire, then as a lay person, how do we choose a career without desire or becoming? How do we quit our jobs or partner without desire or becoming?

A: Basically, there's going to be suffering in either case, whether taking on a career or contemplating a divorce. Try to choose a course of action that creates as little harm as possible. This is a problem for not only lay people, but also for monks. Becoming a monk is a kind of desire for becoming. You learn how to do it in a way that minimizes suffering.

Q: This question is from a person dealing with another person who has ill will and is manipulative, almost to the point that it's laughable. The person asking the question sees all that. Yet even though this person has goodwill and has a good understanding of the other person's suffering, but at the same time trying to preserve one's balance and one's well-being, isn't it best to just cut that relationship, uproot it, uproot the power the other person is trying to have over one?

A: Having goodwill and compassion doesn't mean you have to hang around with somebody. Sometimes you realize the best thing is to go your separate ways. A couple years back, I told the story of Ajaan Fuang with a snake in his hut. He went into his hut and saw a snake slipping behind a little cabinet. So he took it as a test for his own goodwill. For three days, he let the snake stay there. Then, at the end of the third day, he said, "Okay, enough." He sat and meditated, after propping the door open, and he said to the snake in his mind, "We belong to different species, so misunderstandings could happen very easily. You can be very happy out there in the woods. It's not that I

have ill will for you, it's just that I think it'd be better for both of us if you went there." And the snake left.

So sometimes the best thing to do is actually to cut off the relationship with a lot of goodwill.

Q: How to get more equanimity and to use it in daily life? Thank you.

A: You have to remember that everybody has his or her own kamma. There are times when you can have an influence on somebody else and other times when you can't, which is why the contemplation for equanimity starts with, "All beings are the owners of their actions." So develop the attitude that "There will always be times when I cannot get this other person to do what I think is best for them. If my happiness depends on what the other person does, I'm putting myself in a miserable position." This is why you're trying to develop a source of happiness inside. Then it's easier to put up with the other person's unskillful behavior.

Q: How to develop skillful goals for the self as consumer? This feels challenging if the producing part of self doesn't feel much agency.

A: This is where you need to really give your producer some pep talks that, yes, you can create more causes for happiness in your life. As for the goals you set for yourself as a consumer, set them in a step-by-step order. In other words, if you tell yourself, "I'm going to attain stream-entry by the end of this retreat or else," you're setting yourself up for trouble. But if you tell yourself, "Today I'm going to try to stay with my breath as much as I can," that's a much more realistic goal.

Q: I've read that one of the disciples of the Buddha, Ven. Moggallāna, was beaten to death: How is that possible? I thought that kamma was conditioning just our thoughts and our consciousness, but here it's something external. Can you explain?

A: Kamma can influence both internal and external conditions. You can have an influence on what's going on in your mind and also an influence on events from the outside as they affect you. As for how that works, the Buddha said, if you try to figure that out, you'll go crazy.

The best thing is just to try to keep on creating good kamma all the time. That story, by the way, is in the commentaries, and not in the Canon, so it's not quite as authoritative as the Canon. But still, the principle is right: Your actions now can influence outside conditions now and on into the future.

Q: Than Ajaan, concerning death and rebirth, one, would you please share your thoughts on how to skillfully use the three fabrications while the body is undergoing the dying process, and also at the last moments before death?

Two, would you also please share your thoughts on skillful desire for a good rebirth? Are intentions or desires for a heavenly rebirth, or even the desire to be reborn in a specific heavenly realm, skillful or useful? Or if nibbāna is the goal, should one place one's desire on a good rebirth in a human realm, as I have heard the human realm presents better chances of realizing nibbāna?

A: When you're dying, your ability to use bodily fabrication—in other words, your in-and-out breath—will depend on the conditions of the body. I've seen some cases where the in-and-out breath is very, very difficult for people when they die. In other cases, the in-and-out breath is very peaceful. If you can make it peaceful, that's helpful. If you can't, then you focus on verbal and mental fabrication: how you talk to yourself and the images that you hold in mind.

There's a book in English called *Straight from the Heart*, available on dhammatalks.org. It's a series of Dhamma talks that Ajaan Maha Bua gave to a woman who was dying of cancer. He gives lots of instructions on how to talk to yourself as you're dying and also what perceptions to hold in mind.

In the Pāli Canon, they do the same thing. Basically, if there's bad pain at the moment of death, tell yourself, "This will end with the end of the body, but consciousness will continue," so you focus on your awareness. Tell yourself, "If I can attain awakening now, I'll try to do it now. If I can't, I want to be reborn in a place where I can find the true Dhamma and practice it."

As for whether that would be a human realm or a deva realm: One evening at the monastery Ajaan Suwat came up from his hut and saw a group of lay people sitting outside the meditation hall. Out of nowhere, he said, "The human realm is going to get pretty bad as a place to practice. If you have the

choice, try to be reborn in a heavenly realm where you can practice the Dhamma." There *are* levels of heaven where the devas practice. The problem is that there are also levels where they don't practice.

The Canon has a story where a deva has been recently born, and one of the other devas he meets says, "I remember you. We used to chant together down on Earth. So let's chant some more." Then they start practicing together.

But there's also a level of heaven where the devas are pretty much like teenagers. All they can think about is sex, music, and fast vehicles. They don't practice. So, try to choose a place where you can practice the true Dhamma. You have to maintain that intention all the way through death.

Q: This is in response to what I said this morning about Japanese cooks after World War II. It's basically a French version of the story:

Grandmother Artémise was the great aunt of my mother. She lived in Braux, a little village in the Ardennes. She was a very strong woman. One day she threw her husband out the window. From 1914–1918, the German army occupied the Ardennes. Artémise would yell at soldiers who would requisition her rutabagas, but they would still come every day to drink coffee at her house —and every day she would piss in the coffee.

April 24, 2025, Evening

Eightfold Paths

Last night we talked about the four determinations, the set of values that the Buddha has you determine on in order to bring some order to your desires and point them to the goal of putting an end to suffering.

Tonight we'll begin talking about the strategies he recommends for carrying through with those determinations.

You may remember the Buddha's solution to the problem of having many desires is that you hold to one overriding determination. So you have to use discernment to bring knowledge to the process of how desires are formed and judged. Instead of basing your decisions on a definition of who you are in a particular world, he proposed wishing for the best thing possible, and then ordering your sense of self and the world around that. Along the way, you'll be using many different becomings and many different senses of who you are and what the world is, but then, when you reach the goal, you abandon them all.

The framework for this approach is the four noble truths.

- The first truth is the truth of suffering or stress.
- The second is the cause of suffering or stress.
- The third is the end of suffering.
- And the fourth is the path to the end of suffering.

In the first two truths, basically the Buddha is describing what you're already doing.

In describing **the first truth,** he starts by listing many forms of suffering: There's the stress of birth, aging, illness, and death. The stress of not getting what you want. The stress of having to be with what you don't like. The stress of being separated from what you do like.

Then he boils all the forms of stress on the list down to one common denominator, which is passion and desire feeding on the five aggregates. These aggregates are:

The form of your body.

Feelings—and here we're talking about feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain.

Perceptions, which are the labels that you apply to things: "This is a microphone." "This is a lectern." "This means this or that."

The fourth aggregate is fabrications, when you put your thoughts together.

And then finally consciousness, which is consciousness at the six senses—the five physical senses plus the mind as the sixth.

So our passion and desire for these things, feeding on these things: That's the essence of suffering.

The second truth, the cause of suffering, is the passion and desire that wants to feed on these things. The Buddha describes three kinds of craving that want to feed on the aggregates: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and a craving for non-becoming.

We've already explained sensuality—your fascination with sensual fantasies—and you may remember that becoming means taking on an identity in a world of experience. Craving for non-becoming means wanting to destroy whatever becomings you already have.

Those are the first two truths, things you're already doing.

As for truths number three and four, the Buddha describes what you need to learn how to do in order to put an end to suffering. **The third truth** is the cessation of suffering, which mean the end of passion and desire. It's an all-around dispassion, even for dispassion itself.

The fourth truth, however—the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering—involves passion and desire for the steps that will lead you to that third truth. For example, in right effort, which is one of the factors in the path, you generate desire to develop skillful mental states and to abandon unskillful ones. But then as you arrive at the goal, the path itself becomes an object of dispassion, too.

There's a passage in the Canon that describes this dynamic. A brahman comes to see Ven. Ānanda, who's staying in a park. He asks Ānanda, "This practice you're doing, what's the goal?" Ānanda replies, "One way of describing the goal is putting an end to desire." The brahman says, "Is there a path leading to that goal?" And Ānanda says, "Yes, there is." Then he describes a set of teachings called the four bases for success, which we'll be discussing in another day or two.

One of the bases for success is desire. So the brahman says, "That's impossible. You can't use desire to put an end to desire." Ānanda responds, "I'll ask you a question in return. Before you came to this park, did you have a desire to come to the park?" "Yes." "But now that you're here, where is that desire?" "The desire's gone." And Ānanda says, "It's the same in this case: When you practice correctly in line with desire, you can put the desire aside when you've arrived at the goal."

In the same way, the fourth noble truth requires passion and desire in order to put it into practice, but when it's done its work, you can put the passion and desire aside—because your desire has been fulfilled.

Those are the four truths.

Each of those truths has a duty.

> Suffering is to be comprehended.
> Its cause is to be abandoned.
> Its cessation is to be realized.
> And the path there is to be developed.

The texts, as they describe the duties of comprehending and abandoning, basically define them as dispassion. In other words, you comprehend suffering enough to the point where you can have dispassion for it. However, for the third and fourth truths, you start out with passion and delight for them to give you energy for the path. Then, when you realize the third truth through having developed the fourth, you can develop dispassion for those two truths, too.

When the Buddha describes the path, he calls it the noble eightfold path, because there are eight factors in the path. When we look at them, we see that

they're the same eight factors you'd have to use to acquire anything you really desire. As the Buddha says, we have many possible paths that we can follow in life. Some of them lead to suffering, and some of them lead away from suffering. But in each case, they would involve the eight factors. So there are some ignoble eightfold paths, with eight wrong factors. The Buddha calls paths like that "ignoble" because they lead to goals that can't escape aging, illness, and death. He called his path the *noble* eightfold path because it contains eight right factors that lead to the noble goal: a happiness that's free from aging, illness, and death.

So let's first look at the factors in a neutral way, neither wrong nor right.

We start with views. When you make an effort to attain a desire, you have a working hypothesis, a view about how the world works relevant to the goal that you desire. Then you decide on what imperatives follow from that hypothesis: in other words, what needs to be done in order to get what you want. This view also defines your place in that world, usually expressed in terms of becoming: you as an agent, a consumer, or a commentator in that world.

The second factor is resolve. You decide that you're going to focus on that aim, making up your mind to abandon any thinking that would get in the way of attaining that aim and to develop patterns of thought that would help in attaining it.

Then you have three factors on how to speak, how to act, and how to pursue your livelihood in order to gain what you want in that world.

Then there's the factor of effort, which involves motivating yourself to develop the mental qualities needed for the task and to abandon those that would get in the way.

Then there's mindfulness. You focus on what needs to be kept in mind and also what has to be ignored in order to attain the goal.

Finally you need some concentration to stay focused on your aim and to find joy in staying focused.

We can illustrate these eight factors with worldly examples. Take the desire to become wealthy. You start with the view about what constitutes wealth and why it's worth pursuing. Then you have views about what would be proper or

improper ways to succeed in attaining wealth. You also need views about your own ability to do those things.

Then you have to have the resolve to abandon any thoughts or habits that would get in the way of gaining the wealth you want.

Then you have to think about what you're going to say, how you're going to act, and how you're going make your livelihood in a way that will bring about wealth. In other words, you think about you as an agent in the world devoted to obtaining wealth.

Then you have to motivate yourself to make the effort to think in ways that would promote wealth and to put aside thoughts that would call that goal into question.

You have to remember things you have to keep in mind in order to get wealthy.

And then you have to stay focused on this aim and find joy in staying focused on wanting to be wealthy.

Those are the eight factors of any successful path for attaining the wealth you desire. But because wealth is subject to aging, illness, and death, those factors make up an ignoble eightfold path.

The noble eightfold path takes eight similar factors and aims them at a noble goal: the end of suffering.

Right view—"right" in the sense of leading to the goal of ending suffering—starts with a version that's called mundane right view. In this version, the Buddha talks about you as an actor in the world. He also talks about how the world works in terms of the principle of kamma. When you adopt right view, you realize you have to learn how to master that principle of kamma. Then you develop a view that you as an agent can actually master this principle, and you as the consumer will enjoy the good results that come from making good kamma. Then you, as the commentator, notice how your actions are actually following in line with this principle and how they can be improved.

But you have to note that even here, you, as an agent, are defined in terms of the goal, which is to put an end to suffering.

This view of the path, as involving desire and becoming, goes against some simple-minded false views you may have heard about the desire on the path.

For instance, you may have heard that you need to have the view that there's nobody doing the path. Or that you get to the goal by not wanting it. Or you may have heard the desire that wanting things to be different from what they are is to suffer. Or you may have heard that the goal is already there, so all you have to do is relax into it.

The Buddha, however, taught more strategically. You have to use desire and becoming, in order to get beyond desire and becoming.

We can illustrate the actual role of desire on the path with reference to one of the items in the list that defines suffering: not getting what you want. On the surface, this sounds as if the Buddha's saying, "Stop wanting and you won't suffer." In one sense that's true, because once you've arrived at the goal, you don't need to desire anything anymore. But that attitude doesn't get you to the goal.

To make this point clear, we have to look at some of the passages in the readings.

The actual definition of not getting what you want reads like this:

> "And what is the stress of not getting what is wanted? Being subject to birth, the wish arises, 'Oh, may we not be subject to birth, and may birth not come to us.' But this is not to be attained by wishing. This is the stress of not getting what is wanted.
>
> "Being subject to aging, illness, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair, the wish arises, "Oh, may we not be subject to aging, illness, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair, and may aging, illness, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair not come to us.' But this is not to be achieved by wishing. This is the stress of not getting what is wanted." — MN 141

Now, notice: The problem here is simply wanting without knowing what to do to solve the problem. Actually the Buddha's whole quest for awakening was motivated by the desire not to be subject to these things.

This is what he had to say.

> "I myself, before my self-awakening: When I was still just an unawakened bodhisatta, the thought occurred to me, 'Why do I, being subject myself to birth, seek what is likewise subject to birth? Being subject myself to aging, illness, death, sorrow, and defilement, why do I seek what is likewise subject to these things? What if I, being subject myself to birth, seeing the drawbacks of birth, were to seek the unborn, unexcelled rest from the yoke, unbinding? What if I, being subject myself to aging, illness, and death, sorrow, and defilement, were to seek the aging-less, illness-less, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled, unexcelled rest from the yoke, unbinding?'"
> — MN 26

So the desire that motivated the Buddha-to-be to search for awakening differed from the ordinary desire that leads to suffering because it included a dedicated search. He didn't just sit there wishing. He searched for the practice that would lead to what he wanted. He called that search the noble search, in other words, the search for the deathless. This is in contrast to the ignoble or erroneous search which, as we've said, looks for happiness in things subject to birth, aging, illness, and death.

In other words, the problem with the original desire is not that it was a desire, but that it was aimed at a goal—to be free from aging, illness, and death—without doing what was needed to attain the goal.

Now, it wasn't the case that his desire to go beyond birth and these other things was limited just to the beginning of the path. Even on the night of his awakening, his continued desire to find the deathless explains why he wasn't satisfied with the first two of the three knowledges he gained that night.

The first knowledge was knowing his previous lives. He saw how he had been reborn many, many, many times over many eons. As he noted, there were many people who had gained that knowledge and then set themselves up as teachers. But he wasn't satisfied with that because it didn't lead to the deathless.

In the second knowledge, he saw how beings die and are reborn in line with their kamma. That, too, didn't lead to the deathless, but it did give him some insights. He saw that your kamma, your intentional actions, determine

how you're going to be reborn, but kamma can be complex. He saw cases where people had done good all their lives and then were reborn in good places. And he saw some people who had been engaging in a lot of unskillful actions throughout their lives and then went to bad places.

But he also saw cases where people did unskillful things, but then had a change of heart—and sometimes that change of heart was right at the moment of death—and that change of heart actually took them to a good place. Now, it didn't wipe out the past kamma they had done, but it gave them a chance to develop better kamma in the meantime before the bad kamma started giving its results.

Then there were opposite cases: people who had done good things through their life and then had a change of heart: "To hell with good kamma." That took them to a bad rebirth. This showed him the importance of your present-moment kamma. Even if it's right at that moment of death, it can have a enormous impact.

So he decided to look more carefully at present-moment kamma—his intentions—in his own mind. And it was through examining his intentions in the present moment that enabled him to see beyond intentions into the deathless. Seeing the importance of intentions in the present moment to keep the process of birth and death going, he saw how he could abandon all intentions. The understanding that allowed him to abandon all intentions was expressed in the four noble truths. That was what led to his experience of the deathless. And only when he found the deathless did he end his search.

So you can see that the desire for the deathless kept him on track all the way through to the moment of awakening.

Let's listen to what he had to say:

> "Then, being subject myself to birth, seeing the drawbacks of birth, seeking the unborn, unexcelled rest from the yoke, unbinding, I reached the unborn, unexcelled rest from the yoke, unbinding. Being myself subject to aging, illness, death, sorrow, defilement, seeing the drawbacks of aging, illness, death, sorrow, defilement, seeking the aging-less, illness-less, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled, unexcelled rest from the yoke, unbinding, I reached the aging-less,

> illness-less, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled, unexcelled rest from the yoke, unbinding. Knowledge and vision arose in me: 'Unprovoked is my release.'" — MN 26

He uses the word "unprovoked" here because they had a belief at that time that experience was based on various latent properties that could be provoked into action—like the fire element we talked about. When you provoke the fire element, fire appears. When it's unprovoked, the fire goes back into a latent state. This means that anything that's provoked is impermanent. Things that are provoked can change. However, the release the Buddha gained on the night of his awakening was not provoked, which means it's not going to change.

Then he goes on further and says,

> "This is the last birth. There's no further becoming." — MN 26

So, having made the deathless his overriding desire, he didn't just stop with the desire, he also tried to figure out the way to fulfill this desire. When he found the way, he then taught his students to give rise to the same desire for the deathless. Then, rather than simply wishing for the deathless or abandoning desire and resting content with things subject to death, they were encouraged to focus their desire on the path of action leading to the deathless and to follow through with it until they had reached the goal.

This is why the Buddha noted that one of the secrets to his awakening was being "discontent with skillful qualities." Although he taught contentment with material things, he didn't teach a blanket contentment with all things. Contentment with material things allowed him to focus his discontent on the real source of his problem, which is the lack of skill in his mind. As he described his quest for awakening, when he followed a path of practice and found that it didn't lead all the way to the deathless, he abandoned it "in search of what is skillful." He kept trying to raise the level of his skill until it yielded the results he wanted. Only when he reached the deathless was he content.

He illustrated this principle with an analogy. Suppose a person has need of the heartwood of a tree. He shouldn't content himself with the leaves, the

twigs, the bark, or the sapwood of the tree. He has to keep on searching until he finds the heartwood that will serve his purposes.

So lets look at the noble eightfold path in light of this picture of the Buddha's own quest.

Start with right view: Actions are real. They have consequences. They can be chosen. And the best actions to choose are those that lead to the end of suffering. You take as your working hypothesis the idea that the end of suffering can be attained through your efforts and then you take on the duties of the truths in light of that.

This is called transcendent right view. Unlike mundane right view, it doesn't deal in questions about who you are or the world you live in. It focuses directly on actions and events in the mind. In this way, it avoids the terms of becoming. It gets you used to thinking in terms of actions in and of themselves.

Now, the ability to get totally into this noble right view will develop as the path progresses. Sometimes you can manage looking at actions just as actions, and sometimes you need a sense of yourself as an agent who's responsible in order to be able to get those things done, in order to behave responsibly.

That's right view.

As for right resolve, you resolve to abandon sensuality and the pleasures of unskillful attitudes, such as ill will and harmfulness, in favor of the pleasures of right concentration.

Then there's right speech, right action, and right livelihood. These concern you as an agent engaging with the world in harmless ways.

Then there's right effort, motivating yourself to develop skillful mental qualities and abandon unskillful ones for the sake of getting the mind into right concentration.

Then there's right mindfulness, getting focused on the themes that need to be kept in mind to get into right concentration. These are the four frames of reference: body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities, all in and of themselves. You try to be sensitive to events in your body and mind simply as events,

fostering skillful ones and abandoning unskillful ones, like the gatekeeper who keeps unskillful enemies out of the fortress and lets skillful people in.

The final factor is right concentration: finding joy in a still, unified state of mind that allows you to see events in body and mind most clearly. In particular, you'll notice how you shape your present experience with the three fabrications. This is what enables you to do what the Buddha did. You see how your intentions shape your experiences and you get to know your mind so well that you can abandon all intentions. That's how you, too, can find the deathless.

Now notice, there are some features of becoming involved in this. You select which parts of the world are relevant to your goal. You keep them in mind. You select a sense of self that's capable of doing the work, dis-identifying with selves that get in the way. All these strategies are necessary to perform the duties that get you to the goal. But then they'll be dropped when the goal is reached. At that point, you won't have any need for any more desires—because the deathless will be so satisfying that you won't want anything else.

April 25, 2025, Morning

Drowsiness, Restlessness, Anxiety, & Doubt

Yesterday morning we discussed strategies for dealing with two of the five hindrances that can get in the way of your concentration: sensual desire and ill will. Today I'd like to discuss strategies for dealing with the remaining three: drowsiness, restlessness and anxiety, and doubt.

• First, drowsiness: There's a story in the Canon where Ven. Moggallāna, who at that point wasn't yet awakened, was sitting in meditation, nodding from drowsiness. The Buddha suddenly appeared in front of him and asked him if he was nodding, and Moggallāna said Yes.

You can imagine that the Buddha suddenly appearing in front of him would startle him and wake him up. Can you imagine if you were sitting here nodding in the middle of the afternoon, and suddenly one of the great ajaans suddenly appeared in front of you? That would be enough to wake you up. It would be enough to wake *me* up. It's a shame we don't have some famous ajaans doing that. But we do have the Buddha's instructions to Moggallāna on how not to fall asleep when you're meditating.

To begin with, change the object of your meditation. This means that if you're focusing on the breath, you either change the way you breathe or you change to another topic. You can start thinking thoughts of goodwill, thoughts of death, anything that will wake you up. I've found it useful, when focusing on the breath, to take longer in-breaths and to change the spot on which I'm focused with every three breaths: three breaths at the navel, three breaths ay the solar plexus, three breaths in the middle of the chest and so on, going systematically through the body like that.

Another tactic is to ask yourself, "What are the physical symptoms of drowsiness as you're experiencing them right now?" Taking an interest in things like this may be enough to wake you up.

The second technique would be to repeat some chants that you've memorized. If you haven't memorized any chants, repeat a passage of poetry you may have memorized, something with a wise message. And while you're repeating these things, you can think about their meaning. If sitting with others, do this quietly in your mind. If you're sitting alone, you can repeat it out loud. The important thing is that you don't call up an old song you may remember that will pull you out of meditation.

The third technique, the Buddha said, is to rub your arms, pull your earlobes, get up, and wash your face. You can do walking meditation. Ajaan Chah says that if walking meditation isn't enough to wake you up, try doing it backwards. The fear of running into things will be enough to wake you up. Sometimes in Thailand, you hear people recommending that you sit at a place —say, at the edge of a wall, or at the edge of a precipice—where the fear of falling down will be enough to wake you up. I tried that once. I almost fell off, so I don't recommend it.

If you're still drowsy, it's a sign that you need some sleep. The important thing is that you don't give in to drowsiness right away. When you *do* lie down to sleep, resolve that you'll get up as soon as you wake up. If you give in to drowsiness right away, it'll come earlier and earlier and eat into your meditation time. Remind yourself that drowsiness can come from boredom or it can be one of the mind's tricks to hide something from itself. In other words, part of the mind may sense an issue or a memory coming up, one that it doesn't want to deal with, so it makes you drowsy as a diversionary tactic. This means that if you can fight off the drowsiness, you may get to see something that part of the mind has been hiding from you. So let the desire to know help you resist falling asleep.

• The next hindrance is restlessness and anxiety. Restlessness is when you're worried about something in the future. Anxiety is when you recall something unskillful you did in the past. When you're worried about the future, part of the mind will tell you that the more you worry, the better prepared you'll be. And it is true that we should learn to prepare ourselves for future dangers. This is part of the quality called heedfulness, which the Buddha praised as the root of all skillful qualities. So, if there is a specific issue you have to prepare for, you can devote the last few minutes of your

meditation session to thinking it through. At that point, the mind is rested and calm and can think more clearly about what might be the best way to prepare for the future.

But while you're trying to get the mind into concentration, you cannot let thoughts like this invade the mind. They may accuse you of being irresponsible, but when you promise to take them up at the end of the meditation, their accusations are groundless.

At the same time, you can remind yourself that the future contains many variables that you cannot anticipate, no matter how much you worry about them. But you do know that you'll need your powers of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment to respond skillfully to the unexpected. That way, you can think quickly on your feet. So when you're developing these qualities in your meditation, you're not being irresponsible at all. You're preparing for the future in the best way possible. And of course, if you spend a lot of time worrying, that takes away the energy that you're going to need in order to respond skillfully to the future.

As for thoughts of anxiety over mistakes you've made in the past, you have to remember, one, you can't go back to change them. And two, remorse won't undo the mistake. You've probably seen what I call the guilty dog syndrome. You come home. Your dog has pissed on the carpet. It's lying on its back and wagging its tail to show that it's *really*, *really*, *really* sorry, hoping that you'll forgive it. Well, kamma doesn't work like that. No matter how much you lie on your back and wag your tail, kamma will still have its effect.

The best course of action is, one, recognize the mistake. Two, resolve not to repeat it. And then three, spread thoughts of goodwill and the other brahma-vihāras for all. Start with goodwill for yourself, for the person you wronged, and then for all beings. Goodwill for yourself is so that you don't beat yourself up unnecessarily. Goodwill for the person you wronged and for all beings is to remind yourself you really don't want to harm anybody ever again. Then you spread thoughts of equanimity. Remember that everyone has made mistakes. If the world is a stage, everyone is ad-libbing his lines—and most people are really terrible at improv. The best course of action is to have goodwill for all and do what you can to get out of here.

• Then there's doubt. Traditionally it's divided into two sorts: doubt about the Dhamma and doubt about your ability to practice it. I've found that a more pertinent way of dividing doubt into two sorts is this: One is the doubt that wants to know, and the other is the doubt that doesn't care—that says, "I don't want to bother with this," so you come up with all sorts of reasons for not practicing.

In the case of doubt about the Dhamma or yourself that wants to know, tell yourself, "Here's your chance to explore whether what the Buddha said is true about developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones." Regard the meditation as an experiment. Only when you conduct a fair experiment can you know the truth. And only if you try the path will you know whether or not you're capable of doing it.

If nothing else, develop thoughts of goodwill for all. You know that that's skillful and you know that you can do it.

It's also useful to regard the meditation as a game. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, "Play at the meditation." We're not talking about little kids just playing around. We're talking about professional athletes playing to win. But regard it as a game. Otherwise, it gets too serious and grim.

Doubts can also come because you get discouraged about how slow your progress is. Remind yourself of Ajaan Lee's image of trees. Some trees grow fast; others grow more slowly. Banana trees grow really fast. Oaks grow slowly. If you're an oak, you don't want to compete with a banana tree, because you know that banana trees are going to die before you do. They're empty inside and very weak. Slow-growing trees are stronger and last longer. They have more branches and they give more fruit. So console yourself with that thought.

Ajaan Fuang once talked about how there are two types of meditators: those who think too much and those who don't think enough. Those who think just the right amount don't exist. He said that the ones he was worried about were the ones who think too much, because they can get easily discouraged. However, when their mind does settle down, they've learned a lot about their mind in the course of getting it under control. When they run into

a problem, they know, “Oh, I’ve dealt with this problem before. This is how I solved it.”

People who don’t think enough find it easier for their minds to settle down in the beginning, but they really don’t know why it settled down. On the days when the mind is recalcitrant and refuses to settle down, they don’t know what to do. If you belong to the first type, remind yourself that when concentration comes, you’ll have a better sense of the ins and outs of your mind.

As for the doubt that doesn’t want to know, that’s basically laziness. You have to tell yourself, “Here’s a chance to relieve your sufferings. Can’t you at least give it a try?” The Buddha isn’t forcing you to take it all the way. You’re free to stop at whatever point you feel satisfied. Just be careful that you don’t sell yourself short and become satisfied too easily. The dangers of aging, illness, and death, even in this lifetime, don’t play around. They’re serious, and you should be serious about wanting to be free from them—serious, but again, not grim. You’ll notice that the Buddha and all the great ajaans have really good senses of humor. Just give importance to the things that really are important: the desire for true happiness that’s harmless. That’s when you can say that you really love yourself.

For an example of the Buddha’s humor: One time the Buddha compared brahmans with dogs, and the dogs came out better. He started by saying, “In the old days, brahmans didn’t handle money, and dogs didn’t handle money. Nowadays, some brahmans handle money, but dogs still don’t handle money. In the old days, brahmans didn’t have sex with non-brahmans, and dogs didn’t have sex with non-dogs. Nowadays, brahmans will have sex with non-brahmans, but dogs still will not have sex with non-dogs.”

As for the ajaans, Ajaan Mun had a reputation for being very strict and very serious, but Ajaan Fuang liked to tell stories of Ajaan Mun’s humor. When Ajaan Fuang went to stay with Ajaan Mun, he was a young monk and fairly good-looking. There was a community of nuns who lived down the road from where Ajaan Mun was staying, and the monks would go there for alms every day, as part of their alms round. There was one young nun who took a liking

to Ajaan Fuang. She would knit little things for his spoons and fix central Thai food for him.

Ajaan Mun noticed this. So, first he wanted to check out Ajaan Fuang to see if Ajaan Fuang was interested. Ajaan Fuang was not interested. So then Ajaan Mun decided it was time to help the nun. There was one time when the nuns came for some instruction. Ajaan Mun started out by asking if they were observing the eight precepts properly. Then he told a story of Lady Visākhā, who was one of the Buddha's lay disciples. She saw groups of people observing the eight precepts, so she wanted to know why. First she went to a group of old people and asked them why they were observing the eight precepts. They said, "We're observing the eight precepts because we want to go to heaven." Then she went to other groups and asked them their reasons. Finally she got to a group of young women. "Why were they observing the eight precepts?" They said, "We want something better than heaven. We want a husband."

That was the end of the special knitted things and the special central Thai food.

The point of this is that if you learn to laugh at your defilements, it makes it a lot easier to deal with them.

Q & A

Q: Could you please explain or elaborate on when and how it is beneficial to use a narrower focus of attention on a part of the body versus a more expansive one? When going narrow, is there any benefit to going very small? For example, the tip of the nose?

A: When you're very tired and don't have the energy to do a survey of the whole body, just focus on one spot and put as much energy into that one spot as you can. Tell yourself, "I'm going to stay right here, I'm not going to move for a while." That can give you more energy.

Another time for a narrow focus is when there's a specific blockage in one part of the body and it takes an extra bit of energy to get the blockage opened up.

Q: Since you spoke about modifying the length of the breathing, I noticed that when my respirations are really short, this helps to be concentrated. But is it better to also have long respirations?

A: It's good to be able to learn how to concentrate with different lengths of breathing, because the body will have different needs at different times. If you know that you find short breathing easiest to focus on, start with that. Then, once you've settled down, you can try other lengths of breathing while keeping the mind quiet, to see what effect it has.

Q: Ajaan, I find it quite possible to make different parts of the body somewhat pleasant, but it seems much trickier to get one spot really pleasant and spread that everywhere. Do you have any advice or tips on how to proceed?

A: Try to take the parts that you can already make comfortable and think of them connecting. Then, as they connect, they'll get a stronger sense of well-being as they reinforce one another.

Years back, there was a book called, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. In it, the author pointed out that if you ordinarily draw a picture of a face—drawing the eyes and the nose and the mouth—it tends not to look very realistic. But if you draw the spaces between the eyes and the nose, or between the nose and the mouth—spaces that you don't ordinarily pay attention to—you end up with a picture that's much more realistic. It's the same with connecting the comfortable parts of the body. Normally, we tend to connect the painful parts. So you're switching the emphasis, focusing on how to connect the good parts instead. And as I said, they'll reinforce one another and get stronger. Then you can go to the whole body from there.

Q: How do you bring pleasant sensations to the different parts of the body. And also, for the breath, how to make it pleasant, even though it's repetitive, it's always the same?

A: It doesn't always have to be the same. Every time you breathe, ask a question of the body, "What do you want now? Where would you like the breath to flow? Which direction? Do you want to go down the spine or up the spine?" Ask that question with every part of the body. In that way, it becomes less repetitive.

Q: Regarding meditations that require visualization, my ability to visualize is fickle. I can bring up mental images, but then they come and go. It's as if my mind is on an eccentric orbit around the thing I'm visualizing. It gets close, takes a snapshot, and then moves away. The next time it comes, it's from a different angle. Worse, still, the thing it orbits is changing. So it's more as if I create a psychedelic slideshow than a still image. I find this okay, for example, as quick *asubha* against lust, but it seems impossible to do deep body/death *asubha* contemplations like this. How do I perceive, forget this, or how to improve this?

A: In some cases you can use a slideshow in order to contemplate death or other parts of the body. A lot of these contemplations will work when a sudden insight comes or a sudden vision comes and it snaps something open. So it's not necessarily the case that you have to hold one image steadily in mind in order to contemplate it. Other times, instead of visualizing things,

you can talk to yourself. In other words, some people find it easier to stick with language than with visual images. If that's the sort of mind you have, then make use of talking to yourself.

Q: In the practice of ānāpānasati, at what moment should we investigate the body? Before we reach samādhi or after?

A: You can do either. Sometimes investigating the body helps you to settle down. Then, when you're in concentration and you go back to investigating the body, the investigation can be more precise.

Q: This notion of pure consciousness, unlimited and objectless: Does it have a place in Theravada Buddhism? If yes, would it have a role on the path to awakening?

A: Yes and yes. There is a state called the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. It's one of the formless states of concentration based on the fourth jhāna. It's also one of the states of concentration that you can analyze even while you're in it, which means that it can be used for gaining awakening. It's not really objectless, though. In that state, consciousness itself is the object of consciousness. The problem is when you first get there, it feels as if it has no object. But then as you get to know it better, you begin to realize that there is a perception that holds you there.

Q: You said yesterday that it was not a good idea to have your attention both on the feet and coordinate the breathing at the same time. That is, however, what I did, because, with practice, being aware of each step or in- and out-breath becomes easier. As a result, the effort of paying attention diminishes and thoughts come back. They are there, at the same time that the awareness of each step and breath, which means that the simple awareness of each step or breath is not enough to develop concentration. So what more is needed now?

A: You can coordinate the breath and the steps at the beginning of the practice. There should come a time, though, when you find that it's enough to stay with one or the other. One intermediate stage, though, would be to focus on breathing in two spots of the body at once, for example, in the middle of the head and the base of the spine. There are some people who find it easier to

concentrate if you give them two things to do at once, rather than just one. If that's the way you are, that's what you've got to do.

I first visited Wat Asokaram, Ajaan Lee's monastery, when I was a lay man. I got to know some lay women who were practicing there. There was one woman who said that at the beginning of her meditation, once in a while, when her mind settled down, she liked to check out the mind states of everybody else in the room. She noticed that there was one other woman who was faster at getting her mind established. So I went to ask the other woman, "How do you get your mind settled down so fast?" She smiled and then said, "I focus in the middle of my head and the base of my spine, and then think of a line connecting the two." She said it was like using an electric wire to connect a light to two poles of a battery, and the light lit up right away. Within seconds.

Q: Could you provide a few pointers about meditating with *vedanā*, feelings?

A: When you're focusing on the breath, there are going to be feelings right there together with the breath. Instead of simply watching feelings coming and going on their own, you're actually trying to give rise to feelings of pleasure and to maintain them. That's one of the steps in breath meditation: breathing in and out sensitive to pleasure. Then you can try to notice the effect that those feelings of pleasure have on the mind. Of course, in doing this, you gain insight into the fact that feelings can be fabricated. You're not just receiving feelings from past kamma, but you're actually creating feelings out of the raw material you get from past kamma. This is an important insight.

Q: Getting into a meditation state is rather fluid for me, but I have to undergo an MRI pretty soon, and I am claustrophobic, and I do not like the medical world. What makes me even more apprehensive is the agitation around: people I don't know and the pressure in time. How can I prepare for this here, so that in that situation I can find some calm and security inside me?

A: In a case like this, it's best to focus on space: the space inside your body, the space that goes across the border between what's in your body and what's outside your body—the space right here at the surface—the space in the MRI

machine, between all the atoms, the atoms of the people who are agitated around you. Then try to maintain that perception of space as you go in. As for anything else that would get in the way of that sensation of space, just let it go, let it go, let it go.

Breathe in the space. And think of your breath energy, again, permeating the MRI machine. I can sympathize because I'm claustrophobic, too. I dread the day when I will have to go into an MRI machine, so I prepare myself with this perception of space.

Q: My understanding is that jhāna requires the unobstructed flow of breath energy throughout the whole body. Does this mean that if one has a chronic pain due to a medical condition, one cannot obtain jhāna?

A: No, having the breath energy going through the body facilitates jhāna, but it's not a requirement. The quality of jhāna is basically that your awareness fills the body, and you can think of that awareness penetrating through the pain but not being blocked by the pain. In that way, you can attain jhāna in spite of the fact that there will be pains in the body. It helps if you remember that the breath energy actually circulates even in spite of the pain.

There's a strange perception we sometimes have that if there's pain someplace in the body, the breath cannot go through it. In other words, we feel that the pain is there first, and then we're trying to force the breath through the pain that's already there. You have to switch the perception. Remind yourself the breath came first, the pain came later, so the pain doesn't have to obstruct the breath at all, or your awareness.

Q: This is my fifth retreat here, and, as with every time, about the same time, halfway through the retreat, these movements in my upper body, swaying back and forth, start to appear. In the first retreats, those movements were wide. Now they've become vibrations, barely noticeable from outside. This feels like a heart beating, and it's pleasant and even comforting when I follow this pleasure. Then when I try to come back to the breath, I feel a painful point, like a sting that is persistent in the heart, accompanied by a flow of heat, hot flashes. The only solution that I've found, for now, is to get out of the meditation and open my eyes. Is there another solution?

A: One question is, when you open your eyes, does that sense of pain go away? If it does, then open your eyes for a while, and then go back into concentration. The important thing is, when those sways in the body happen, that you don't try to stop them. Let them die on their own. And while the swaying is going on, stay right within the breath at the same time the swaying is happening. It's possible that the pain in the heart comes from the fact that you're trying to stop the swaying.

This kind of physical sensation is usually regarded as a manifestation of rapture. The basic rule about rapture is that you don't try to stop it, but you don't encourage it, either. Stay rooted in the breath and allow the manifestation to do what it's going to do, and then it'll calm down on its own as your focus gets more refined and your concentration gets stronger.

Q: Sometimes I see the painful effects of a desire and I manage to drop it, which brings me relief. But then it comes back as soon as something rouses it again, and then the cycle starts over. Does this mean that the appeal of this desire is still hidden in me? Could you help me see clearly where it is located and how to abandon it?

A: You can see the appeal at the very moment when you decide, "I'm going to go with that desire again." It can be in your mind right at that time. It might be a brief visual image, a word, or a sentence. Try to see if you can detect it. That will give an idea of what the allure is.

It's also possible that that your vision of the bad effects of the desire hasn't gone straight to the heart yet. You tell yourself, "I'll drop it for now, but I may come back." You have to get to the point where you can say, "I'm never going to come back to this one." So it's about seeing both the allure more clearly and the drawbacks more effectively.

Q: If I have an unskillful desire, but I manage to hold myself in check before the fabrications start or while they are in the process, does that mean that an intention formed enough that it will register in my kamma?

A: There is no kamma registry. However, the fact that these desires appear in your mind is an effect of old kamma. Your new kamma is what you do with

it. If you decide, "I can resist that," that's your new good kamma. That's what counts.

Q: Is desire underlying all the obstacles or just some obstacles such as rites, views about oneself, views about the world?

A: Desire underlies everything. So, yes, there will be desire that underlies your obstacles. These obstacles come from desire, and then they become objects of desire, which is what keeps the process going. What we're trying to do is to develop alternative desires that can cut through this cycle.

Q: This is in reference to MN 117: I haven't fully understood the difference between right resolve with and without fermentations.

A: The description in the text is that right resolve with fermentations, or āsavas, is your basic definition of right resolve, which is making up your mind that you're going to avoid thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, thoughts of harmfulness. Basically, resolve is a type of verbal fabrication, in other words, the way you're talking to yourself. This is said to be "with fermentations" in that it leads to a good rebirth.

The higher level or transcendent level of right resolve is basically to get the mind into the first jhāna. You're talking to yourself about getting the mind centered on its one object. This is said to be "without fermentations" in that it's part of the path to the end of rebirth, based on an intention to go beyond rebirth. That's the difference.

Q: In Mahāyāna Buddhism, they criticize the Hīnayāna because there's an attachment that forms to these pleasant states, such as concentration or nibbāna, that they represent a trap. What do you think?

A: I don't see them as a trap. Nibbāna is released from all traps. The main difference between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna is that in Hīnayāna, we see that suffering is caused by each person's lack of skill, and you can't make another person skillful. Each person has to become skillful of his or her own accord. The best you can do for someone else is to teach how to develop more skill, but the ability to become more skillful to the point of actual liberation is something that each person has to do for him or herself. From the Hīnayāna

point of view, the idea that you can actually liberate somebody else is the trap. You're going to hang around and help everybody else out, but you don't end up helping anybody. Excuse me for saying this, but my vision of Mahāyāna is that you're in a movie theater that's on fire. Everybody's rushing to the exit, but there are two bodhisattvas at the exit. One of them says, "You first." The other said, "No, you first." "No, you." Everybody dies.

April 25, 2025, Evening

Right Resolve & Right Effort

We've been talking about the Buddha's solution to the problem of unskillful desires and conflict among desires. You bring knowledge to the process of how desires are formed and judged, then you judge them against the best possible desire, which is for the end of suffering. Any desires that help in that direction are to be encouraged and developed. Any that work against it are to be abandoned. The approach of the solution is fueled by desire itself: We have to want to do it for it to work.

Last night we talked about the noble eightfold path as a whole. It takes the pattern of how we develop and stick to desires in general and applies it to the desire for the end of suffering.

Tonight I'd like to focus on two of the factors of the path: the factors that most directly focus on the issue of desire, which are right resolve and right effort.

Right resolve is defined as making up your mind that you want to develop three types of desires: those aimed at renunciation, those aimed at non-ill will or goodwill, and those aimed at harmlessness. This means that you have to aim at abandoning the opposite kinds of desires: for sensuality, for ill will, and for harmfulness.

Right resolve sets your general policy in dealing with these desires. It builds on right view, realizing that suffering comes from cravings of three types—for sensuality, for becoming, and for non-becoming—and that right concentration is central to overcoming them. So it determines to abandon any desires that would get in the way of attaining right concentration.

Right resolve is the active side of discernment. You see that right view is not enough on its own. You also have to resolve to act on it, to change the way you think and act if you're going to get any real benefits from it. This is a theme throughout the teachings of the Canon and the forest tradition: The wise

response of the Dhamma is to want to do it. It's like getting the recipe for a good dish. The wise approach is not to frame it and put it on the wall. You follow the recipe so that you can actually taste the food.

That's the general policy.

Now, the specific tactics for getting into right concentration are in right effort, where you generate the desire to do four types of right effort: to prevent the arising of any unskillful qualities that haven't yet arisen, and to abandon any unskillful qualities that have. As for skillful qualities, if they haven't arisen yet, you try to give rise to them. When they're already there, you try to develop them as far as they can go.

Right effort also involves learning how to motivate yourself. In other words, you give yourself reasons for *wanting* to do this. The Buddha recommends many reasons you might use to motivate yourself for practicing right effort: Heedfulness is the main one, realizing that you open yourself to suffering if you don't abandon unskillful qualities of mind, but that you can avoid that suffering by developing skillful ones in their place. Compassion is another reason for wanting to practice right effort: You'll suffer less, and the people around you will suffer less as well.

Right effort also involves knowing how much effort is right. The Canon talks about having "just right" effort. It tells a story about a monk who tried too hard. When he was a lay person, he was so delicately brought up that he had hair on the soles of his feet. He hears the Dhamma, so he decides to ordain. He does walking meditation to the point where his feet start bleeding. So he gets discouraged. He thinks, "Maybe I can disrobe and still make merit."

This is another case where the Buddha suddenly appears in front of him. "Were you thinking of disrobing?" "Yes, sir."

The Buddha asks him, "When you were a lay man, were you good at playing the lute?" "Yes, sir."

"What happened when you tuned the strings too tight? Did it sound good?" "No, sir."

"When it was too loose, did it sound right?" "No, sir."

"Did it sound good if you tuned it just right?" "Yes, sir."

If you've ever tuned a guitar, you know that first you have to tune one string so that it's just right, and then you tune the other strings to that first string.

In the same way, the Buddha said, you have to tune the effort of your practice, starting with how much effort is just right for you right now, and then you tune the remaining of the five faculties to that. Those other faculties are conviction, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment.

For example, suppose you come home from work and you're tired. You don't sit down and say, "I will not get up until I have achieved supreme awakening." You tell yourself, "I'm going to get through the hour." At other times, though, when you do have a lot of energy, you don't say, "I'll just take it easy tonight." You give it whatever you can. So that's one of the things that go into consideration when you figure out how much effort is just right: how much effort you're capable of right now.

The other thing you have to take into consideration is the nature of the particular problem you're facing. As the Buddha says, the causes of suffering come in two types. With some of them, you simply look at them and they wither away. In other words, you haven't been paying much attention, but when you do pay attention to what's going on in the mind, you see that this mind state is stupid and you drop it.

However, there are other defilements in the mind that, when you look at them, they stare right back. They won't go away easily. In cases like that, the Buddha says, you have to exert a fabrication—in other words, the three types of fabrication we've been talking about: the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, and the perceptions and feelings you hold in mind.

Those are some of the issues of right effort.

Now, right effort and right resolve are closely related to each other, especially in the practice of right mindfulness and right concentration. Yet right resolve is one of the most under-appreciated factors of the path. So for the rest of tonight's talk, I want to focus attention on that.

Right resolve is one of the first factors the Buddha discovered when he got on the right path. He saw that he needed to divide his thoughts into two types, based not so much on their content, but on their source and their result: where they came from in the mind and what they led him to do. On the one

side, there were unskillful thoughts, the ones that came from sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness.

The Buddha said to himself, "These thoughts lead to my own affliction or to the affliction of others or to the affliction of both. They obstruct discernment, promote vexation"—trouble or frustration—"and they do not lead to unbinding."

On the other side, there were skillful thoughts that were involved with renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness. As the Buddha observed, "These thoughts lead neither to my own affliction nor to the affliction of others nor to the affliction of both. They foster discernment, they promote lack of frustration, and they lead to unbinding."

He gave the image of a cowherd. In South and Southeast Asia they need cowherds because people grow rice, and during the rainy season, the cows like to get into the rice fields and eat the rice. So the cowherd has to do everything he can to stop them from getting into the rice. He beats them and he yells at them. As the Buddha said, in the same way, he had to control his unskillful thoughts, beating them back, making sure that they didn't invade and remain in his mind.

During the dry season, though, the cowherd can relax. The rice has been harvested, and there's no danger of the cows eating the rice, so they can go pretty much anywhere they want. During this period, the cowherd can rest under a tree and just keep in mind the fact that the cows are over there someplace. In the same way, when the mind is thinking skillful thoughts—based on renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness—you can let those thoughts wander as they like.

And before we go on to the next step, I'd like to stop for a minute to give you an overview of what the Buddha is doing here. It's basically the cost-benefit analysis we ordinarily do, but with three important added features. Remember, we discussed our ordinary cost-benefit analysis: thinking about the allure, thinking about the drawbacks, and then deciding whether the allure outweighs the drawbacks. Then we come up with a temporary decision as to what to do with that particular desire for right now.

In this passage, though, the Buddha is adding three important features.

First, he introduces two preliminary questions. He looks to see where these thoughts come from within the mind by seeing what arises with them, and to see what passes away, leading them to pass away. That's the first additional feature.

The second is that he sets a very high standard for what kinds of thoughts or desires will be acceptable. They have to be harmless and they have to not stand in the way of unbinding.

The third is that he tries to arrive at the total ending of any passion for that kind of desire.

This approach is laid out in a more detailed program that he later recommended to his students. This program has five steps, expanding on the three-step program we usually follow.

• If any unskillful desire arises in the mind, look for, one, the origination in the mind—what event in the mind caused that desire to arise.

• Two, look for its passing away: both of the desire and of its cause. This is a test to make sure that when the cause and the actual desire arise together, it's not just a coincidence. If the cause also disappears at the same time that the desire disappears, that shows that they are connected.

• The third step is to look for the allure.

• The fourth is to look for the drawbacks. You compare the allure to the drawbacks, holding on to that standard of harmlessness and leading to unbinding, until you see that the drawbacks outweigh the allure.

• Then the fifth step is what's called the subduing of desire and passion. Here the value judgment is aimed at total escape from the desire, and not just at a provisional judgment. This step is also called the escape.

These five steps are derived from the four noble truths as explained in right view. The origination and passing away establish the cause of whatever is problematic. In the case of the four noble truths, that would be the second noble truth and its connection to the first. The allure is the location of the craving. That also is connected to the second noble truth. Seeing the drawbacks is a part of the fourth noble truth. And finally, the escape through dispassion is connected to the third noble truth.

I'd like to stop right here to explain dispassion. It's not a gray, dismal state of mind. It's more a state of maturity. You've grown up and are able to abandon childish games. I'll give you two examples. One is tic-tac-toe. There comes a point where you've played it enough that you've figured it out. You know how never to lose, so it's no longer a challenge and you're no longer interested. Another example would be chess. You know you'll never totally figure it out, but the lessons you learn from it about strategy are so artificial that getting any better at it would be a waste of time. It's still a challenge, but you see that it's not a challenge worth taking on. So you just lose interest in it.

Those are two ways in which you develop dispassion for things.

Now, more to the specifics on right resolve. The three resolves are about wanting to overcome three kinds of desire: for sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness. We talked about temporarily getting past the hindrances of sensual desire and ill will yesterday morning. Here I want to look into how we can get more serious about gaining real freedom from these ways of thinking.

As you may remember, sensuality is not the same thing as sensual pleasures. It's more the fascination of thinking about and planning sensual pleasures. The Buddha calls this delight. It's your inner conversation or verbal fabrication, combined with mental fabrications, devoted to advertising the pleasures to yourself so that you feel good about pursuing them and will want to pursue them more. It's because of this delight that we often blind ourselves to how foolish we can be in the pursuit of some of these pleasures and how they can actually be harmful to ourselves or to others or to both.

We often think we're clever in our pursuit of sensual thoughts and in our striving to realize them.

Years back, I was invited to give a talk at a university in Indiana. Afterwards, the professor told me that the class that I talked to had had a discussion about what it was like to meet a monk. One of the women, a cheerleader, said she was surprised to find that I had intelligent opinions about things in general because she thought that monks would be sub-human—her point being that people who pursue sensual desires, in her eyes, were smarter than those who don't.

Now, this sense of our being clever can take very sophisticated forms. Think about the vocabulary we have around wine and cheese, and now even chocolate. People talk about the notes and the taste of wine, the character of the wine. In America, they talk about the personality of wine. And now with chocolate, they talk about the notes you have in chocolate: notes of fruit or tobacco.

It reminds me of a cartoon I saw in *The New Yorker* one time.

A caveman has just received a bowl of soup from his wife. He sniffs it and says, "I'm getting notes of woolly mammoth."

Just before I came here, I was given a chocolate bar, and the wrapper said that, sure enough, it had notes of chocolate.

A lot of this has to do with telling ourselves that we're very sophisticated in indulging in certain sensual pleasures. But what is the pleasure? It's simply the burst of taste on your tongue and that's it.

You could also think about the discussions of art and music that suck you in and make more out of sounds and colors than is really there. There's just a contact, and then it disappears. You have to work at making it stay in the mind. And for what purpose? Usually there's a strong sense of self that feels the more sophisticated your taste, the more discriminating your palate, then the better person you are. But does a fine palate really make you better than other people? The clear fact is that this obsession with refined tastes can actually make you more conceited.

Now, some sensual pleasures are totally harmless. They're to be judged by their effect on the mind. Among the harmless pleasures are the beauties of nature, harmony in groups of people, the pleasures of seclusion, and basic good health. Even with them, though, you have to be on your guard not to get infatuated. An example I can think of from America: We have a lot of people who we call fitness nuts. And there was a company in Salt Lake City that offered to freeze your body after you died, just in case someone would later be able to put the life back into frozen bodies some time in the future. One woman signed up. When they asked her why she had signed up, she replied, "I worked so hard to put my body in good shape. It'd be a shame to let it decompose." That's going too far.

Now, harmful sensual pleasures are:

- those that involve breaking precepts,
- those that intoxicate the mind, making you heedless,
- those that make you conceited, and
- those that make concentration difficult.

As for sensuality itself, the time spent in delighting in past, present, and future pleasures is basically a waste of time. It makes it hard to get the mind into concentration because one of the prerequisites for the first jhāna is that you are secluded from sensuality. So you've got to learn how to develop thoughts of renunciation if you're going to get the mind into right concentration.

You do that by applying the five-step program that the Buddha recommended. In other words, one, you start with the origination. You try to locate the spot where your craving and desire are focused. Say that you desire another person. Do you really desire the person or is it your perception of the person? Is it in an inner conversation about what you would like to do with that person or is it your perception of yourself in relationship to that person? In other words, "If I go around with this person, I'll look kind of cool."

When you examine this issue, you begin to realize that the craving isn't located in the person him- or herself, it's actually located in your mental activity. This is why personal relationships can be so fraught. You're more interested in your perceptions than you actually are in the real person.

The second step is to see the desire pass away. You see that desire is not at all monolithic. It comes and it goes. Then it comes and goes again. Often you have to dig it up again. Even when it seems relentless, if you're observant, you see that it has its lapses. Seeing those lapses enables you to realize that it's not as powerful or as overwhelming as it seems. Sometimes it'll tell you, "If you don't give in to me now, I'm simply going to get stronger and stronger until you can't stand it." But if you can see that it does pass away, you realize that it's lying to you.

The third step is to consider the allure. You try to see exactly the moment in which you tell yourself that you really want to side with the origination. The

reason of the allure is often very arbitrary, fleeting, and sometimes it's embarrassing. That's why it's often so hidden.

Then you look at the drawbacks of those desires. You have to work hard at maintaining those desires, and even then they're fleeting. You often get involved in doing unskillful things to maintain the pleasures you desire. And then you have to ask yourself, "Do you ever really gain satisfaction this way?" As the Buddha said, "Even if it rained gold coins, it wouldn't be enough for one person's sensual desires." Another time he said, "If you had two mountain ranges the size of the Himalayas made of solid gold, it still wouldn't be enough for one person's desires."

Then you remind yourself that it's going to keep you out of right concentration and it stands in the way of the third noble truth.

The step of looking for the drawbacks is where the Buddha has you apply the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to the desire. Remember that this step is related to the fourth noble truth, aimed at attaining the third noble truth—and that it's in the context of the third noble truth that these three perceptions actually have some power. Ordinarily, without taking the third noble truth into consideration, we'd say, "If something is inconstant, who cares? I want to get it when I can." But in the context of the third noble truth, you say, "This is getting in the way of something more worthwhile. So something inconstant, stressful, and not-self would actually be not worth going after."

That leads to the escape, which is the value judgment: You develop dispassion and you outgrow it. And you gain a sense of freedom when you can get past it.

Now, there's a need for a non-sensual physical pleasure of concentration and mental pleasure of insight to compensate for letting go of sensuality. Only then can you really get past it. This is why right resolve focuses on getting you into right concentration. We'll talk more about this tomorrow.

The second right resolve is to get past ill will, and if we discuss this now, we're going to be here until ten o'clock. We'll be talking about goodwill further on in the retreat, so we can skip over ill will for now.

However, let's talk about the third right resolve: wanting to get past harmfulness. This harmfulness is a willingness to let your actions harm others or yourself, not out of ill will, but simply because you don't care. You decide that others don't matter, or you don't matter, or you think that what you're doing is serving a higher purpose. Here again, you have to use that five-step program. You start with the origination of thoughts that the suffering of other people or your suffering doesn't matter. You have to ask yourself, "What kind of mind state does that come from? Is it because you're lazy and apathetic? Doctrinaire? Self-righteous? Self-important?" In America, you often hear callous people saying, "These people are losers, they don't matter." Where does that idea come from?

Then you have to look to see, "When do these thoughts actually pass away?"

As for the allure, again: Harmfulness allows you to be lazy. Is that the allure? Is the allure in that it gives more importance to your ideals than to actual people? Is the allure in the idea that you're above thinking about the consequences of your actions?

As for the drawbacks, there was a time when King Pasenadi was in the palace with his queen, Mallikā. In a tender moment, he turns to her and says, "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" You know what he's thinking. He wants her to say, "Yes, your majesty, I love you more than I love myself." And if this were a Hollywood movie, that's what she would say. But this is the Pāli Canon. You don't get away with saying stupid things in the Pāli Canon. So she says, "No, there's nobody I love more than myself. And what about you? Is there anybody you love more than yourself?" The king has to admit that, No, there's no one he loves more than himself. That's the end of that scene.

So the king goes to see the Buddha and tells him what happened. The Buddha says, "You know, Mallikā is right. You can search the whole world over and you will never find anybody you love more than yourself. But at the same time, everybody else loves themselves just as fiercely." And the conclusion the Buddha draws is interesting. It's not that it's a dog-eat-dog world. He actually says, "You should never harm anybody or cause them to do harm." After all, if your happiness depends on harming others, it's not going

to last, one. And two, it's going to be really bad kamma. Then three, if you get other people to do harmful things, they're later going to hate you. So the conclusion is: Don't do any harm and don't be careless about the harm you cause.

The escape in this case would be developing compassion for yourself and others.

What you're doing here is replacing unskillful desires with more skillful ones. You investigate the verbal and mental fabrications that go into those unskillful desires and you're replacing them with more skillful verbal and mental fabrications. But many of our emotions and desires don't respond just to talking. In psychotherapy, they've discovered that the best methods combine a talking cure with training in being sensitive to your body. In Buddhist terminology, this would involve bodily fabrications, the way you breathe, as well. That's mastered through concentration based on breath meditation. You need to have the pleasure of concentration to change the balance of power in this cost-benefit analysis of the Buddha's five-step program, because a state of inner well-being gives you something good with which to compare the allure of the unskillful desire.

The Buddha in many places shows the connection between right resolve and getting the mind in right concentration.

One passage comes from the sutta in which the Buddha talks about comparing himself to a cowherd.

He thought, "I could allow those skillful thoughts to wander as much as they liked." Then he tells himself,

> "'If I were to think and ponder in line with skillful thoughts, even for a night, even for a day, even for a day and a night, I do not envision any danger that would come from it, except that thinking and pondering for a long time would tire the body. When the body is tired, the mind is disturbed, and a disturbed mind is far from concentration.' So I steadied my mind right within, settled, unified, and concentrated it. Why is that? So that my mind would not be disturbed." — MN 19

In other words, when you've trained yourself to think skillful thoughts and avoid unskillful thought, it's much easier to drop those thoughts to get the mind into concentration.

In Majjhima 117, the Buddha talks about two levels of right resolve. There's mundane right resolve, which we've been talking about so far. And then there's transcendent or noble right resolve, which is defined as the verbal fabrications that go into bringing in the mind into the first jhāna, the first stage of right concentration.

In other words, you have to examine any unskillful desires in terms of the three fabrications. And you can develop dispassion for them through the Buddha's five-step program. You take them apart and then you reassemble those three fabrications into skillful mental and physical states as a basis for strengthening your skillful desires and for allowing the mind to get into right concentration.

So tonight we've been focusing on using desire to create better mental and verbal fabrications. Tomorrow night we'll focus on how to use desire to create a state of concentration to make skillful use of all three types of fabrication.

April 26, 2025, Morning

Remembering Ajaan Lee

Today is the 64th anniversary of Ajaan Lee's passing. Because he was the teacher who taught the method that we're practicing on this retreat, I'd like to talk a little bit about him this morning.

There's a monastery in Thailand where they have a museum devoted to the forest ajaans, with statues of the most highly-regarded ajaans arranged around a room. At the base of each statue is a short statement about what was distinctive about that particular ajaan. Now, it's pretty horrible to have your whole life reduced to one phrase. But in Ajaan Lee's case, the phrase is: "one with high mental power."

For most people, when they think about high mental power, they think about the high power of his concentration. And in this case, that is true. His concentration was very strong. He tells about times when he would spread mettā, and it sounds like he's going into battle. There was one time when he was alone in a forest when there was an elephant in rut. They call it "in rut" because when male elephants get sexually excited, a liquid called "rut" comes out of a gland near their ears. They're pretty crazed when that happens. The neighbors pleaded with Ajaan Lee to leave the forest because it was dangerous, but he told them that he had confidence in his own powers of mind.

Then one day, the elephant actually came to the clearing where he was staying. He looked the elephant in the eye and said to himself, "This elephant is crazed." So before he knew it, he found himself trying to climb a tree. But then a voice came into his ear and said, "If you're afraid of dying, you're going to die many more times." So he sat down at the base of the tree, facing the elephant, and spread lots of goodwill. The elephant stopped still for a moment, flapped its ears once or twice, and then walked away.

There was another time when Ajaan Lee took a group of lay people on a tudong into a forest next to the ocean. In the middle of the afternoon, they saw

an enormous cloud of ocean mosquitoes coming toward shore. So he told everyone to get out of their mosquito nets. As he told them, "I'm going to fight off the mosquitoes with mettā. No holds barred." And sure enough, after five minutes, the mosquitoes all went away.

This attitude, by the way, is very typical in the forest tradition: that goodwill is a form of strength. Here in the West, we tend to think of goodwill as a soft, tender emotion. But for the forest ajaans, they've seen many, many times that it has protected them from dangers, so for them, it's definitely a strong force.

So the power of his concentration is one aspect of Ajaan Lee's power of mind.

But there's another side to that power, which was his intense curiosity. This relates to the breath meditation method that he taught. Among the forest ajaans, he was the one who devoted the most time and energy to developing this particular topic of meditation. It started one time in the 1930s, when he went to India to visit the Buddhist holy spots: where the Buddha was born, where he gained awakening, where he first taught the Dhamma, and where he passed away. At that time, very few people were taking that kind of pilgrimage.

When he went there, he saw all these yogis standing on one leg, lying on beds of nails, and so forth, and he wanted to know how they did that. Now, his way of answering that question was to pose the question in his mind and go into concentration. What came out of his concentration was that they were playing with the breath energies in their body. So he started doing the same sort of thing: not lying on beds of nails, but playing with the breath energies in his body. And he found that it was a very effective way of getting into concentration.

So when he came back to Thailand, he wrote down a technique for breath meditation, which is now Method One in the book, *Keeping the Breath in Mind.* At that point, they didn't call it Method One, because there wasn't yet a Method Two.

But he continued doing investigations, using his own breath, using his own concentration, until 1953, when he decided to go into the jungle in northern Thailand for the rains retreat. It took him three days to walk into the

place where he planned to stay, and a few days after he arrived, he had a heart attack. No medicine. No doctors. No way to get out except to walk.

So he told himself, "If I have to die, I'm ready to die. But if I don't have to die, let's see if I can get out of here." He had nothing else but his breath. So he started using his breath energies to help treat his heart, and by the end of the three months of the retreat, he was able to walk out. When he got out, he wrote down Method Two, which puts much more emphasis on the body than Method One.

You'll notice, when you look at his Method Two, that when he starts the survey of the body, he starts at the back of the neck. And if you've ever had any heart problems, you'll know the back of the neck is an area where a lot of tension tends to build up. So that's probably why he started there.

If you look at his later Dhamma talks, you can see that he continued to experiment with the breath in different ways, and he would give many different analyses of what different types of breath there were in the body and how they can move around the body.

For instance, in Method Two, he talks about having the breath energy going down the spine. But in some of his Dhamma talks, he talks about the breath energy starting in the soles of the feet, going up the legs, and going up the spine. So the message is that there are many different ways that the breath energy can be used to help with the ailments in the body and getting the mind into full-body concentration.

Based on these experiments, he was one of the few forest ajaans who would talk about concentration as a whole-body awareness and give so much detail about how the breath energies can be used. When he started writing books about the practice, he focused on breath meditation more than anything else because, as he said, of all the breath meditation methods, this is the safest. As long as you're grounded fully in the body, it's the safest concentration you can have.

Among the forest ajaans, he was also one who wrote the most systematic treatments of how to practice the Dhamma. And he addressed the big issues of meditation, controversies like the relationship between mindfulness and concentration practice. There is one school of thought that mindfulness

practice is one thing, concentration practice is something else, entirely different. But as Ajaan Lee pointed out, mindfulness is meant to get the mind into right concentration, so these two practices are intimately connected.

In his discussions of mindfulness, he emphasized the three qualities of mind you're supposed to bring to it:

- *sati*, mindfulness, which means keeping something in mind;
- *sampajañña*, alertness, which means noticing what you're doing while you're doing it and also noticing the results; and then
- *ātappa*, ardency, your whole-hearted effort to do this well.

Of those three qualities, he identified ardency as the wisdom factor. In other words, wisdom isn't just a matter of trying to see, "Oh yes, this is inconstant, this is stressful, this is not-self." As Ajaan Lee basically says, if you're ardent, you see that there are certain things that you have to develop and that you're capable of doing, so you try to develop them as far as you can. Instead of just seeing things as they are, you're seeing things as they can be—in other words, exploring what their potentials are.

In this sense, you're actually fighting against the three characteristics—or, rather, the three perceptions—of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. You're trying to create a state of mind that's constant, pleasant, and under your control. Now, as you push against these three characteristics, you'll eventually reach a point where they push back. That's when you really get to know and understand them.

That's where concentration practice comes in, and in this area, Ajaan Lee basically revived the discussion of jhāna. He's the only one of the forest ajaans who describes the various stages of jhāna and how you get into them in great detail.

For example, with the first jhāna, you have five factors. He identified three of them as the causes. You have:

- directed thought—in other words, you choose your topic and stay focused on it;

- evaluation, in which you adjust the topic and you adjust the mind so that they fit together; and
- singleness of preoccupation—in other words, you focus all of these three activities on one object, such as the breath.

Then the other two factors of the first jhāna, pleasure and rapture, are the results.

Here again, Ajaan Lee identified the wisdom factor among these five, which is the evaluation. As you're adjusting the breath and adjusting the mind, you're getting a sense of cause and effect. You can see the extent to which you're creating the causes for a sense of pleasure, a sense of rapture. That means you see the process of fabrication and the principles of cause and effect in action. That's how evaluation gives rise to wisdom and discernment.

So these are some of the distinctive features of Ajaan Lee's teachings and of the power of his mind.

I always think it's amazing: Here he was, the son of peasants with just a fourth-grade education—reading, writing, arithmetic—but he was still able to solve a lot of the problems in the discussion of Buddhist meditation through his own curiosity, his willingness to experiment.

Also, of the various ajaans, he's the one who talks the most about meditation as a skill, like the skills of sewing a pair of pants, weaving a basket, or making clay tiles. In other words, you work with an object. That's ardency. You observe yourself as you're doing the work. That's alertness. Then you look at the results. And if the results are not good, you go back and try something else. That's evaluation.

This is in line with the Buddha's teachings on how the Dhamma is nourished, which is through commitment and reflection. You give something a serious try. You review the results. And then if what you're doing isn't working, then you try something else. This also involves a certain amount of ingenuity. You come up with new ideas and then test them.

Now, all of these qualities of Ajaan Lee were important in one other aspect of his life, which was that he brought the practice of the forest tradition into central Thailand. You have to realize what a major accomplishment this was:

getting it out of the forests in the Northeast and bringing it down into Bangkok. The people in central Thailand tend to look down on the people from the Northeast. There was also the problem that, at that time, the government had asked the monks to stop their meditation practice and help set up an educational system instead, because Thailand was trying to fight off the British and the French who were trying to take over the country. The government's policy was, "We need a national education system." And who would be best to teach the kids? At that point they didn't have any teacher-training schools, so they wanted the monks to become the teachers.

Some people complained that this was diverting the monks from their real duty, which was to practice for the sake of nibbāna, so the government conducted a survey. Whether the results of the survey were true or not, they claimed to have surveyed the different monasteries in Thailand where people were meditating, and they came to the conclusion that nobody was practicing correctly, so the monks might as well become elementary school teachers. That was the attitude in central Thailand at that time.

But in the Northeast, you had monks who were still wandering around in the forest, so the ecclesiastical authorities in Bangkok considered them to be vagabonds. There was a fear that they might be communists. So the monks in the forest tradition realized they needed some protection in Bangkok. It turned out that one old high-ranking monk in particular, a Somdet living in Bangkok, was in charge of overseeing the Northeast. He tended to harass the forest monks. But one time, he fell sick. So Ajaan Lee went to visit him. After bowing down, he sat over in a corner of the room and meditated quietly.

The Somdet could feel an intense force coming into his body from Ajaan Lee's direction. He asked, "What are you doing?" Ajaan Lee replied, "I'm giving a gift of stillness." The old monk said, "Well, whatever it is, keep doing it. It feels good." So Ajaan Lee did this every day, every day. As the old monk started getting better, Ajaan Lee started teaching him how to meditate, and the old monk began to get results. He said, "I've been wasting my time as a monk." He added, "It's a shame that I'm the only one benefiting here." On top of that, Ajaan Lee could explain the Dhamma in ways that he had never heard before. So he arranged for Ajaan Lee to begin giving Dhamma talks and

leading meditation in one of the halls there at the monastery in Bangkok. This is how the teaching of the forest tradition began to come into Bangkok.

Here we get to the other side of Ajaan Lee's strength of mind. Some of the other monks in the monastery were jealous of Ajaan Lee. They said he was teaching people to be deluded. Those monks believed that the time for jhāna had passed. So how did Ajaan Lee fight back? He had a number of psychic powers. He even had the ability to loan his psychic powers to other people. There was one old woman whose job was to wash the bathrooms in the monastery. When she had some free time, she would come and sit and meditate with Ajaan Lee. And she got so that she could read minds. So whose minds did she read first? The monks. And she was shocked. They were thinking things monks should not be thinking. She went and she told the Somdet. "Do you know what these monks are thinking?" She went down, person by person by person by person, what they were thinking. The Somdet said to himself, "She's probably right."

So he called all the monks together and told them, "You have to watch out. These people can read you inside and out"—literally: "down into your innards." So people began to have a little bit of fear of Ajaan Lee. That also helped spread the forest tradition in central Thailand.

As Ajaan Lee said, "If the Buddha had tried to teach only through the force of words, Buddhism wouldn't have lasted this long." It also depended on the power of his mind.

There are lots of stories about Ajaan Lee's psychic powers. I could keep you here all morning telling them, but I'll tell one more story.

After Ajaan Lee had started teaching in Bangkok, someone gave him some land outside of Bangkok to start a monastery. It was a couple of miles outside of a town called Samut Prakaan. There was a bus that ran from the town past the monastery. So one time, Ajaan Lee with a couple of other monks got on the bus in Samut Prakaan and he asked the driver, "Can we stop off at this one store on the way? I'll be just a couple of minutes. Can you wait for me and then take me to the monastery?"

The driver said, "Sorry, we don't give any special treatment to anybody."

So they get to the store. As soon as Ajaan Lee gets off the bus, the motor stops. He goes in and talks to the owner of the store. The driver cannot start the bus. The owner of the store invites Ajaan Lee to have a cup of tea. So Ajaan Lee has a cup of tea. The bus still doesn't start. Then when he gets back on the bus, he says, "Okay, you can start the bus now." And the bus starts up. From that point on, anything Ajaan Lee asked for, the bus drivers would give him.

So let's dedicate this sit to the memory of Ajaan Lee.

Q & A

Q: In order to make the practice of working with the body more pleasant, can we do mettā for each part of the body?

A: There's the name of a French ship that over-wintered in Antarctica, called "Pourquoi Pas?" So why not? You can have as much goodwill for your body as you like. There was a book I was reading one time about an American man who was suffering from some maladies in his spleen. One night he yelled at his spleen. A few days later, he met with a psychic friend. She meditated to see how his body was doing and then asked him, "Did you yell at your spleen? Never yell at your spleen."

Q: This question is from the person who had headaches. We suggested to try first to relax her focus, but added that there were other techniques. So now she's saying, "It's not working. What are these other techniques?"

A: Some of the other techniques would be to focus on the space around the body, holding the perception that there's no boundary to that space. When the breath gets comfortable, you can think of the whole body, without having to go through the step-by-step survey. That global, boundless awareness can help release the pressure of the headaches.

Another technique is to think of whatever pressure there is in the head going down your spine, through your tail bone, and down into the earth.

See if those techniques work.

Q: How does one deal with very strong agitation that seems to be throughout the entire body? It has been difficult trying to deal with this during the retreat, and I'm having trouble trying to breathe through it. Should I just bear with the agitation?

A: One thing you can do here is, again, to think of space around the body. Another is to spend an entire hour doing mettā meditation. For everybody. As

for the excess energy in the body, think of opening up the exit channels, through the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet, or out your eyes, and see if you can allow the agitation to disperse from the body through those spots. If that doesn't work, come back again, and we'll try some other things.

Q: Dear Ajaan, I am having trouble finding joy in meditation. I can settle my mind down into awareness of the breath, but after some point, tensions build up in my upper back. I think these tensions come from an important dilemma. I have trouble relaxing them without changing my posture or stretching. Should I be able to experience joy through tension or pain? Should I desire joy in practice, as it appears to be the next step forward?

A: Again, with tension in the upper back, think of it going out the arms and out the palms of your hands. Or you could think of the breath coming in from the back when you breathe in. If the tension doesn't go away, then tell yourself, "I'll focus on the parts of the body that are not tense right now." Again, you'll find some joy in staying there.

I have a brief story to tell. I had a student one time who had Marfan syndrome. It's a hereditary disease of the connective tissue, and people who have it tend to die about age 20 or 30. In addition to having the disease, and she was a co-founder of the National Marfan Foundation. She died around the age of 50 from a stroke. Before she died, she asked that I preside at her memorial service. So at the service, there was a combination of her Buddhist friends and her Marfan friends.

At the beginning of the ceremony, I gave a guided meditation, like the guided meditation I've been giving to you. Afterwards, people gave eulogies. One woman talked about how her nephew had Marfan syndrome. When he was 13, he had to go in for a heart operation, and when he came out of the operation, no amount of medication could help relieve the pain. So my student went to visit this boy to see if she could help. She listened to his symptoms for a while and then she said, "Breathe through your butt." The woman who was giving the eulogy then turned to me and said, "It worked. And now I know where she got that idea." So, if nothing else, breathe through your butt.

Q: I'm so glad to hear that so many people in the retreat are feeling pleasant sensations during their meditation and concentration. But as for me, it's nothing. Zilch. And I've been practicing for years. Is this due to an inadequate method? Or is it a matter of past kamma?

A: It could be either. But what you have to do is to try a different method to see if something else might work for you. Breath meditation is not for everybody. What's important is: Can you find an object that you enjoy focusing on?

And also, the previous question is a proof that not everybody is having pleasant sensations.

When I first started meditating as a young monk in Thailand, there was another young monk who would meditate in the same meditation hall with me. After about 15 minutes, my legs were sore, my back was sore. I looked at the other monk, and he was sitting very peacefully. I said, to myself "I have to preserve the good name of America." So I continued sitting.

I found out later that the other monk was going through a lot of pain. And he looked at this American sitting peacefully over there, so he said to himself, "I can't lose to the American."

So don't assume that the people around who look peaceful are actually peaceful. Send them some thoughts of compassion in case they're in pain.

Q: Would there be a difference between the whole-body awareness that we cultivate in sitting meditation and the one in walking meditation? It seems to me that for walking, it's enough to concentrate on the movement of the feet and the legs, and the whole-body awareness is not needed as you recommended it in sitting meditation. So would you please clarify?

A: In the beginning you may find it enough to focus on the feet and the legs. But eventually you do want to develop a whole-body awareness while walking. The only difference from sitting is that this whole-body awareness should be firmly anchored in one spot of the body that's relatively immobile, such as the middle of the chest, the middle of the head, or the stomach. That's because your awareness has to keep going in and out, in and out, as you're

walking so that you don't run into things. To compensate for that, you need to have a very strong sense of center as you're walking.

Q: The ultimate desire to not be suffering anymore is a bit abstract for me. How can I give this more meaning to know how to align my life and function with that?

A: Keep in mind the question that the Buddha says lies at the beginning of wisdom, which is, "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" Every time you're faced with a decision as to what to do, ask yourself which choice will most likely lead to long-term welfare and happiness. Then follow that choice.

Q: How to give incentives to the consumer to prioritize the long-term goal instead of focusing on the short-term one? I find that my long-term projects or skill cultivations often get put on the back burner because the mind prefers to get the quicker satisfaction of accomplishing something right now.

A: Try to remind yourself of the last time you chose something for the short-term benefit at the expense of the long term. Then remind yourself how much you regret it and ask yourself, "Do you want to make that mistake again?"

Q: If I have, for example, three hours a day to study the Dhamma, how much time do you recommend spending on meditation, and how much on reading/studying?

A: This will vary at different stages in your practice. There are times when you find that you really do want to read in order to understand things, especially when you come across a problem in your meditation. There will come other times when you say, "I've read enough, I just want to practice." So the amount of time you spend on studying and meditation will vary over the course of time, back and forth. But as a general rule of thumb, I would say start with half an hour for study and two and a half hours for meditation.

Q: Ajaan, I understand that what is happening to one today is a result of one's kamma in the short term and long term. But, when it comes to catastrophes that are blindly making lots of victims—like the Twin Towers,

the tsunami in Southeast Asia, or recently the earthquake in Myanmar—all these thousands of victims must have had very different kammas. Some of them possibly had very good kammas for many lifetimes. So how do we explain this kind of situation on a karmic plane?

A: There's a general misunderstanding about kamma, which is that each person has one kamma account and what you see at any one moment is the running balance in the account. Actually, we have many karmic accounts. Or to use the Buddha's image, we all have a big field of kamma with many different karmic seeds, good and bad. What you see at any one moment are the seeds that are sprouting right now. So it is possible that you have many good seeds in your karmic field, but some bad seeds happen to be the ones that are sprouting at the moment. So in the case of a large-scale catastrophe like that, what you have is people who happen to have bad karmic seeds all sprouting at the same time.

It's not the case that they all did the same bad kamma together. But they individually did bad kamma of that sort at some point in the past, and it just so happens that those are the seeds that are sprouting right now. As for where those people will go after the event, it'll depend on other seeds in their karmic fields.

Q: What is the unborn?

A: The unborn is the same thing as the deathless. It's a dimension that has no space and no time. When you arrive at that dimension, you realize there's no beginning point because there's no time. Also, there will be no ending point because there is no time. That's what you discover when you take apart all the different fabrications that you're doing to hold the present moment together, which is why it's called the unfabricated.

Q: Yesterday you said compassion for someone doesn't require that you have to spend time with them. Isn't it the same with love, that loving someone doesn't mean you have to spend time with them? For example, a family member that we love and have compassion for but with whom we do not get along: Is this a reason to not spend time with them? Is this related to the role we give ourselves as parents, etc.?

A: Basically, if you find that after spending time with this person, you're yelling at each other every time, it might be a good idea to spend some time apart. Now, if this person is your mother or father, you do have responsibilities to them. In other words, even if you can't get along with them, you want to make sure that they don't fall into poverty. And if they fall sick, make sure that there's somebody to look after them well. As for your children, if they're difficult to get along with, you're under no obligation to spend time with them.

Q: Fermentations = rumination?

A: The word Pāli word for fermentation, *āsava*, can mean "effluent" or a kind of wine. The image is that sensuality, becoming, and ignorance keep bubbling up in your mind and coming out in your thoughts and your words and your deeds, leading to the flood of rebirth. When you gain full awakening, these fermentations will stop.

Q: Lying is against the precepts, but we can lie to ourselves without knowing it, can't we? We can lie by omission, is that not right? Why, then, is it such an important fundamental element? Can you clarify these elements?

A: In the practice of the Dhamma, we're trying to find the truth, so we don't want to consciously tell a lie to anybody. This is specifically defined as saying something that you know is not true. That's the basic element.

As for lying through omission, you have to stop and think: Every statement you make omits something. If somebody asks you, "How are you?" and you feel obliged to go through every single sensation you feel, you'll find that when you've finished, they walked away a long time ago. So the question is, if you're leaving something out, what is your intention in leaving it out? In this way, the precept forces you to look at what you're saying and what you're not saying to get an idea of what your intentions are. For example, there are examples where, if you give information to somebody, you know they're going to abuse it. In a case like that, you can legitimately omit that information. But you can't say anything that, in and of itself, is false.

For example, there are Nazis at the door. You have Jews up in the attic. The Nazis ask, "Do you have Jews in your attic?" You can say, "I have nothing

shameful here." What you say is true. But in another case, when you hold back the information out of a bad intention toward the other person, that wouldn't break the precept, but it would be against the Dhamma.

Q: When doing mettā meditation, some teachers have you imagine that you're looking at a puppy or kittens or a baby, so that you could generate feelings of care, love, and protection. Would you have other advice or tips about this? When we start the meditation at this retreat, the mettā at the beginning of the session is so quick that I feel that in my practice it's more mental than deeply felt.

A: We can imagine having a goodwill for a snake. In other words, you don't have to protect the snake or love the snake, but you wish it well. What this means is that mettā doesn't have to have a strong emotion associated with it. All it needs is the understanding that you need to spread goodwill to all the beings you encounter, especially those you don't love or like, because if you act on ill will toward them, that will become your bad kamma.

There's a passage in the Pāli that's often translated as saying that you should have love for all beings in the same way that a mother would love her only child.

A couple years ago, when I was teaching here, someone wrote a little note saying that it's not the case that every mother loves her child.

However, what the passage actually says is that you should *protect* your goodwill in the same way that a mother would protect her only child. In the Buddha's days, when there was no social safety net, if you were a mother with only one child, that child was your future, so you would protect it with your life, whether you loved it or not.

So you should have the same attitude toward your goodwill: You've got to protect it in all situations. The image the Buddha gives is that two bandits have pinned you down so that you can't move, and they're cutting you into little pieces with a two-handled saw. The Buddha says that even in a case like that, you have to have goodwill for them, because if you have any ill will for them, then you will be reborn with an attitude of ill will, and that will take you to a bad rebirth.

April 26, 2025, Evening

The Skills of Right Concentration

A crucial part of the Buddha's solution to the problem of unskillful desires and the conflict among desires is to bring knowledge to the process of how desires are formed and judged. This is a process that happens in the actions of the mind in the present moment, so an important part of the solution is to learn how to watch your mind in action. The mind's actions are easiest to watch when, one, you're doing something good; two, you're trying to master a skill; three, you feel nourished with a sense of non-sensual well-being; and four, your mind is quiet. So the best way to observe the mind is to try to master the skill of doing something good and pleasurable, and in particular, the practice of concentration, as the mind is quiet, focused directly on the mind itself.

This is most definitely a skill.

Once I was teaching a group of people who were practicing another tradition. They asked me to explain kamma, so I told them that the Buddha's explanation of kamma is directly related to explaining how we can master skills. In other words, some of the things we experience come from the past, and some of them come from actions we do in the present moment. This allows you room to change your actions so that you can actually master a skill —and in particular, the skill of meditation.

When I got to this last point, I got a lot of blank looks. Afterwards, people told me they had been told there was no skill to meditation, that you simply watched whatever came up in the mind without trying to change anything.

That is most definitely *not* how the Buddha taught meditation because the Buddha himself uses images of skill to illustrate what's involved in meditating.

For example, with mindfulness, your mindfulness is like a skilled gatekeeper to a fortress on a frontier who is able to recognize disguised

enemies and can keep them out, and to allow friends in to the fortress. As for concentration, the Buddha compares it to being like a skilled cook working for a king who would observe the king as he's eating. The king is not going to tell you, "I like this, I don't like that." The good cook has to observe for himself what the king reaches for, what he eats a lot of. Then he can prepare more of those foods, and less of others. In that way, the cook satisfies the king and gets a reward. In the same way, you have to observe your mind, to see what it likes so that it will settle down in concentration. Then you get rewarded with a sense of peace and well-being.

The Buddha also compares a good meditator to a goldsmith who knows when to heat the gold, when to cool it, and when to examine it. In other words, you know when to put forth effort, when to cool the mind down with concentration, and then when to examine it with equanimity.

As for discernment, the Buddha compares it to being like an archer who can shoot long distances, fire accurate shots in rapid succession, and pierce great masses. In other words, you can see the past and future implications of what you're observing in the present. You can quickly see things in terms of the four noble truths. And you can pierce your ignorance.

In fact, all the Buddha's teachings can be seen as a body of skills. Remember that all four noble truths carry duties that are associated with them, and your task in each case is to master the duty. The primary cause of suffering, in Pāli, is called *avijjā*. It's usually translated as ignorance, but it can also mean lack of skill.

Of the forest ajaans, as I mentioned this morning, Ajaan Lee is the one who speaks most often of meditation as being a skill. He says that mastering your breath is like learning how to make things: a pair of trousers, baskets, silver ornaments, and clay tiles. As you work with these things, the object you work with becomes your teacher. You have to be sensitive to what you're doing so that you can connect the areas where you need improvement to specific actions you did so that you can correct them.

So tonight I'd like to talk about a set of the Buddha's teachings that most clearly treats concentration practice as a skill. The Pāli term is for this set of

teachings is *iddhipāda*, which can be translated as bases for success or bases for power. The four are:

- desire,
- persistence,
- intent—in the sense of being totally focused on what you're doing—

and

- your powers of analysis.

The other night I told you the story of Ven. Ānanda and the brahman when Ānanda was staying in a park. The brahman comes to the park and asks Ānanda, "What is the goal of this practice you're doing?" Ānanda says, "One of the goals is to put an end to desire." Then the brahman asks him, "How do you do that?" Ānanda lists the four bases for success, starting with desire. The brahman says, "Well, in that case, it's impossible, because you can't use desire to put an end to desire."

You may remember how Ānanda answered him. Ānanda first asked him, "Before you came to the park here, did you have a desire to come?" "Yes." "Now that you're here, where is that desire?" "It's no longer there." "How about the effort you made?" "I made the effort, but now I'm not making any more effort because I've arrived." And so on down with the four bases for success.

We use the four bases for success to arrive at the goal, and then we can put them aside.

So let's look at them more in detail.

- The Buddha says that the first base for success, ***desire,*** has to be balanced: not too strong, not too weak. In other words, if you think about how much you want to get to the goal but you don't do anything to attain the goal, that desire is too strong and actually gets in the way. If the desire is too weak, then you're not going to make the effort to do what you need to do. So it has to be just right.

It also has to be focused on succeeding at the causes. We all want the peace of concentration, but to get that peace, we have to learn how to enjoy the work involved in getting there. The work may not always be peaceful, but it can

produce peace, in the same way that fixing a meal and eating it can make you feel satisfied and full. You're not full as you fix the meal, but you won't get full unless you fix it and eat it.

In this case, you use the qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency as you stay with the breath. Mindfulness, in turn, is nurtured by two qualities: virtue—holding to the precepts—and what the Buddha calls "views made straight."

You have to remember that mindfulness means keeping something in mind. If you've been holding to the precepts, then when you look back on your actions, there's nothing you need to feel embarrassed or ashamed about, and nothing that you might try to deny. So there are no walls in your mind. This makes it easier to reflect back, back, back on your actions. When you do something harmful, you tend to put up a wall to deny it, and that makes mindfulness difficult.

Having "views made straight" means believing in the basic principles of kamma. In other words, you are responsible for your actions and you believe that to improve your life, you have to change your actions.

Another one of the bases for mindfulness is restraint of the senses. You keep watch over what you're looking at, listening to, tasting, etc. And particularly, you're keeping watch on *how* you look at things and *how* you listen, so see what effect it has on the mind. You might ask yourself, "Actually, who's doing the looking here? Is wisdom doing the looking or is anger doing the looking?" As when you turn on the computer: Who in your inner committee turned on the computer? The computer doesn't turn itself on. You have to ask yourself, "What is my motivation for looking here?"

• The second base for success is ***persistence***, which basically means that you keep engaged in right effort and you keep encouraging yourself along the way. When I was in Thailand, I had to learn how to sharpen a knife without a knife sharpener. Here in the West, you have a machine, you go *zip*, *zip*, and you're done. In Thailand, they have a big stone and some water. That's it. You have to very carefully sharpen the knife against the stone without putting too much pressure, without putting too little pressure, all along the blade. It takes about half an hour. I found an important part of the process was talking to myself as

I did it. “I’m one-sixth of the way, I’m one-fourth of the way, I’m one-third of the way,” and so on. That’s how you do it.

For many people, especially those with a harsh inner critic, this can be a difficult part of the practice because your inner critic tends to discourage you. So you have to retrain your inner critic. If you have no inner critic at all, you can’t improve your actions. So you have to learn how to critique the critic. In other words, say, “I’m not going to listen to you unless you give me positive criticism.” After a while, it actually obeys.

The important part of the persistence here is that you have to keep encouraging yourself even though you haven’t seen the goal and you can’t see it approaching on the horizon. It’s like driving to the Grand Canyon. The road doesn’t look like the Grand Canyon. And you can’t see the Grand Canyon ahead of time. It’s not like a mountain. As you drive to a mountain, you can see the mountain ahead of you, but you don’t see the Grand Canyon ahead of time.

Sometimes you’re told that moments of stillness in your mind are a foretaste of nibbāna. But that’s not true. You can’t see nibbāna ahead of time. It’s as if you’re traveling to the Grand Canyon having been told that it’s like a big ditch. You see a big ditch on the side of the road, and the person driving you there says, “Do you see that ditch on the side of the road? That’s your taste of the Grand Canyon.” But it’s not. When you get to the actual Grand Canyon, you’ll see that it’s something totally different and much more impressive.

So don’t content yourself with the ditch. You have to place some confidence in the map or the travel guide or on the signs along the side of the road that say, “Grand Canyon, 10 miles.” That’s an important part of your persistence: giving yourself some encouragement and not settling for something less when you’re capable of something more.

• As for the third base for success, you have to be really ***intent*** on what you’re doing. In other words, instead of just thinking, “I want the Grand Canyon, Grand Canyon, Grand Canyon. When do I get to the Grand Canyon?” you focus on the road. That’s what gets you there. In this case, you have to observe how you’re engaging with the three fabrications: how you’re breathing, how you’re talking to yourself, and the perceptions you hold in

mind about the breath. For example, with perceptions: Where does the breath originate? There are times when you perceive the breath as coming from outside of the body. Other times, you have a sense that the breath is coming from inside. Actually, it's the energy from your body, so it starts inside. Then you ask, "Where in the body does it originate? Is it one spot? Is it in every cell in the body?" Try these different perceptions and see what it does to your experience in the breath.

You also can experiment with the perceptions of how the breath flows and what needs to be done to make it flow more smoothly. You also have to pay attention to how you handle physical and mental feelings. For example, for some people who tend to suppress their emotions, breath energies can easily get stirred up and then stuck in different parts of the body. So you have to know how to unblock them through their escape channels. As I said today, you can think of the energy going out the palms of your hands, the soles of your feet, or out the eyes.

• As for the fourth base for success, ***analysis,*** you have to look carefully at the results of your actions and then use your ingenuity to figure out how to make adjustments, in terms of your desire and your persistence and your intent, to make sure that they're balanced and focused in the right places. This relates to the two terms Ajaan Fuang would use most frequently when giving meditation instructions. One was, "Be observant" and two was, "Use your ingenuity."

There are a lot of blanks left in the Buddha's teachings on meditation, and in some cases, the blanks seem to be intentional. For example, he says, "Look for the potential for a rapture in your body." Then he says, "Where is that to be found?" He says, "It's to be found in the potential for rapture." So you've got to find it yourself. Basically, he's teaching you to *like* learning how to be observant.

These four bases for success are line with the Buddha's instructions on how the Dhamma is to be nourished. One, through commitment: In other words, you really do it. Then two, you reflect on what you've done.

We can compare this with an attitude that's been picked up by a false reading of the Kālāma Sutta. Some people interpret it as saying, "I won't

believe anything unless it's been proven to me." But the Buddha's attitude is you're in no position to truly judge the Dhamma until you've committed yourself to actually doing it well. This is called practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. Then you can train yourself to be really good at reflecting. In other words, you have to commit yourself before you can really be a good judge.

You may notice that these four bases for success would apply not only to the practice of concentration, but also to any skill. You have to want to really want to do it. You have to stick with it. You have to be intent and focused on what you're doing, and use your powers of analysis to get better.

Now, if you noticed that, you're not the first person to notice that. It's interesting that when the Buddha gave a list of his most basic teachings, the bases for success are included in the list, but in the West it's hardly ever taught. In countries like Thailand and Burma, though, it's one of the basic teachings and it gets applied to any skill in life. If you want to succeed in anything, you have to develop these four qualities. When you go to school, they tell you, "Develop these qualities." In fact, someone once went to visit a military helicopter repair place near Bangkok, and there on the wall was: "Desire, persistence, intent, analysis": *"Chanda, viriya, citta, vimaṅsā."* Can you imagine that in a restaurant kitchen or aircraft hangar in Paris?

I have a student whose son is a professional athlete, and recently I gave him a book on the four bases for success. He looked at the cover and he said, "The basis for success is working your ass off." I told him he was right about one of them, which is the persistence. Then he agreed that the other three were necessary as well. If fact, I figured out that you can use the language of sport to cover all four: "You gotta wanna win." "Work your ass off." "Lock in." "Use your brains."

You can also use these four bases for success to succeed with your defilements. If you really want to seduce somebody, you have to really want to do it. You can't think of the unattractiveness of the body at that point. Then you have to really stick with it and be focused. And you have to think through how you're going to do it, reflecting on what's worked and hasn't worked in the past.

However, the Buddha doesn't encourage you to use these bases for success for your defilements—with good reason. One, they're usually focused outside, rather than on the mind inside, so they pull your attention away from your real problem. Two, they agitate the mind so that it can't see clearly. And three, they often involve a lot of lies.

Just listen to the words of any love song. When I was in Thailand, there was a period when one song in particular was very popular. Every morning when I went on my alms round, I would hear it. And the refrain of the song was, "Though a star may be so far, so far away, I'll get it and put it in your hand." It's an obvious lie. And it's saying, "I want you so much I'm willing to lie to you."

So, to get back to the topic: On the path we use desire to bring the mind to concentration because we want to see the mind in action, and it's more transparent when it's brought to stillness. We also base our concentration on virtue to make it more honest, with a sense of the worth of what you're doing, which is why virtue and views made straight are an important part of the foundation not only of mindfulness, but also of concentration.

Now, as you master any skill, your sense of self begins to fade away as your actions fall more and more in line with what you want them to do, and you can be more and more focused on the actions rather than on yourself. This is when you get "into the zone." This point will be important as the path progresses, as you direct your thoughts away from your attachment to self and toward your actions. We'll discuss this point more later in the retreat.

As for the strategy that's required for this task, remember those three types of craving that lead to suffering: craving for sensuality, for becoming, for non-becoming. The fact that the craving for non-becoming is part of the problem creates a practical dilemma as you're trying to bring an end to the craving that leads to becoming. Remember what non-becoming means: the destruction of a becoming that's already there. The Buddha's solution is not to try to destroy a state of becoming that's already there, but to let it fall away on its own. Meanwhile, you focus on the processes that would lead to a new becoming, and then develop dispassion for them before they create a new state of becoming.

When you bring the mind to concentration, you're actually getting hands-on experience with the steps that lead to becoming. In the Buddha's description of dependent co-arising, some of the factors that come before becoming include the three fabrications. They also include a factor called name-and-form.

Form is the body as you sense it from inside: the properties of coolness, warmth, solidity, and energy.

Name includes different mental actions: perception, feeling, intention, and attention.

When you're doing concentration, you're focused on these things and activities in and of themselves. For form, you're focusing on the breath. As for name, you have the perception of how you visualize the breath to yourself. There are the feelings of pleasure or pain that you feel as you meditate. You have the intention to stay in the breath. And you're paying attention to what's going on in the body, what's going on in the mind, focusing on questions that help bring things to stillness.

So as you're getting focused on the breath, you're beginning to see these processes before they become a state of becoming. The state of concentration itself is a type of becoming, but as you get more and more skilled at it, you get more and more sensitive to the processes that lead up to it. As you get to see them in action, you gain a sense of how ephemeral they are and how they require constant attention. Eventually, you begin to develop dispassion for them. That's how you get past becoming without falling into the trap of craving for non-becoming.

That's where the path is headed.

But before we explore that topic more fully, we have to look at some of the Buddha's other teachings on how to use desire to develop the path. And that will be the topic for tomorrow night.

April 27, 2025, Morning

Jhāna

Yesterday there were some questions about jhāna, so that's the topic for this morning's talk.

The first question was how to get into the first jhāna, and the short answer is to follow the breathing instructions I've been giving you in the guided meditations. You settle in with one topic, like the breath, with a sense of pleasure and refreshment, and you try to attain a state of full-body awareness. That's the first jhāna.

The word *jhāna* is related to a verb, *jhāyati*, which means to burn with a steady flame. The Pāli language has lots of different verbs for burning. For example, *jalati* means to burn as a normal fire does, with flickering flames, whereas *jhāyati* means to burn with a very steady flame. It doesn't flicker—as with the flame of an oil lamp. You can read by the flame of an oil lamp because it's so steady, unlike the flame of an ordinary fire, which flickers and is hard to read by. Or you can compare it to the flame of a gas stove. When you turn it way down, the flame is steady.

So when you have the mind in jhāna, you can read it clearly. Or it's as if you're cooking your mind over a slow flame—like scrambled eggs. You stir and stir and stir, and at first nothing seems to be happening, but then eventually, the eggs start to set.

In the texts, they describe right concentration as four levels of jhāna. The first level of jhāna corresponds to the establishing of right mindfulness. Basically, you're staying with an object, such as the breath, in and of itself, and you're putting aside all thoughts related to the world. You bring three qualities to this focus: You're mindful, ardent, and alert. After a while, the mind really does begin to gather around the breath, with a sense of pleasure or ease.

Then there's what's called *pīti* in Pāli, which can be translated in many ways, such as refreshment or rapture, and it can be felt in many different ways

as well. One is a sense of fullness. Another is a chill running through the body. For some people, when it's intense, their hair stands on end. For others, it's milder. Usually there's a strong sense of energy running through the body, but you stay focused on the breath, your awareness fills the whole body, and you allow those feelings of rapture and ease to spread through the whole body as well.

The texts say this state also has what's called direct thought and evaluation. In other words, you're talking to yourself about the breath: "Is the breath comfortable? If it's not comfortable, what can I do to make it comfortable? If it is comfortable, how can I maintain that sense of comfort? And once I maintain it, what can I do with it? How can I get it to go throughout the entire body?" And you just keep on doing that.

The image they give in the Canon is of a bathman who prepares soap for people in a public bath. Back in those days, they didn't have bars of soap. They had something like a soap flour, and you would mix water into it, in the same way you'd mix water with flour in order to make bread. Then you would knead the water through the powder to make the whole ball of soap-paste moistened.

In the same way, you work the feelings of ease through the patterns of tension in the body to loosen them up. The water in the image stands for the pleasant sensations. The movement of the kneading stands for rapture. And the bathman corresponds to directed thought and evaluation. There's a slight sense that you're standing outside of the breath and working on it from the outside.

After a while, that sensation of rapture and ease fills the body, and there's nothing more that you consciously have to do to adjust the breath to maintain it. So you can stop the directed thought and evaluation and just stay with the perception of "breath." Now, there's still a sense of ease and rapture, and in fact it often it gets stronger. This state of rapture and pleasure without directed thought and evaluation is the second jhāna. Your awareness and pleasure continue to fill the body.

Here the Buddha gives the image of a lake with a spring coming up from the bottom of the lake, so that the cool water from the spring fills the entire

lake. Again, the water stands for pleasure, the movement of the water stands for rapture, but there's no bathman anymore. In other words, there's no need for directed thought and evaluation because you don't consciously have to spread the pleasure and rapture in the body. They spread on their own. Then you just stay there.

After a while, the sense of rapture becomes unpleasant. An image that I like to use—it doesn't appear in the Canon—is that, to avoid the rapture, you tune your mind into another frequency, to something that's calmer and more easeful inside, like switching from hard rock to soothing music on a radio. Then again, that sense of stillness fills the body. For a while, the movement of rapture is still there, but it begins to dissipate because you're not focusing on it. After a while, it goes away. You enter the third jhāna.

There's still a sense of pleasure filling the body, but the mind is becoming more and more equanimous. The image the Buddha gives here is of a lake of water that has lotuses growing in the water. Some of the lotuses don't grow above the surface of the water, so they're saturated with water from the tips of the flowers down to the tips of their roots. In the same way, your body is saturated with a sense of ease, but the sense of rapture has stopped. In this image, the water again stands for pleasure, while the fact that the water is still stands for the fact that the rapture is gone. There's still a subtle sense of in-and-out breathing in the body.

As you stay there after a while, you begin to notice that the sense of breath energy fills the body so much that you don't feel the need to breathe the in-and-out breath. You don't try to stop it, it's just that there's no sense that you need to breathe in or breathe out.

This is when you enter the fourth jhāna. There's a sense of equanimity, both in body and mind, and your awareness fills the body. And that's it: There's no sense that you have to breathe. If there's any sense that breath energy is lacking in one part of the body, it'll immediately come from another part of the body to make up the lack.

The Canon's image here is of a man sitting with a white cloth covering his whole body from his head to his feet. There's no water in the image, which symbolizes that the pleasure is gone. But your awareness feels bright and

clear. Some people actually sense a light in their body. Others don't, but there's a sense of clarity in your sense of the body.

Those are the four jhānas.

The fourth jhāna can become the basis for some formless states of concentration as you begin to realize that your sense of the shape of the body depends on the movement of the energy in the body, so when the energy flow gets still, the sense of the surface of the body begins to disappear. It feels as if your body is more like a cloud or mist of tiny droplets of water, with no clearly-defined boundary around the cloud. After a while you decide, "Why focus on the water? Why don't I focus on the spaces between the droplets?" Now, you don't leave the body, you don't go outside, you still stay within the body, and you know that if you wanted to have the perception of the shape of the body, you could recreate that perception—but you realize you don't have to. In fact, it's more pleasant not to. You have the sense that the space inside the body connects with the space outside the body and there's no end to that sense of space. Just maintain that perception of "space, space, space," all around. That's the dimension of the endlessness of space. Stay there for a while.

Eventually the question arises, "What's aware of the space?" Then you focus on a sense of awareness that again has no clear boundary, and you maintain that perception of "knowing, knowing, knowing." That's the dimension of the endlessness of consciousness.

The next step is to notice you have a sense of oneness in that awareness, and you ask, "What happens if you just drop the sense of oneness?" What replaces that oneness is the perception of nothingness. Then you maintain that perception. That's the dimension of nothingness.

Finally, that perception gets very, very gentle. You realize that you can't say there's a perception there, but you can't say there's no perception there. You recognize where you are but you don't have a name for it. And you just stay there. That's called the dimension of neither perception or non-perception.

So those are the different states of jhāna. It's possible in each of those states, except for the very last one, to analyze the state while you're in it. It's like having put your hand fully into a glove and then pulling it out slightly.

Imagine that you have eyes on the ends of your fingers, and you can see what's inside the glove.

The Buddha gives the analogy of a man standing looking at a person sitting down, or a man sitting down looking at a person who's lying down. In other words, you can observe your mind in the state of jhāna from slightly outside it and you can see what activities are there. So you're bringing back a little bit of directed thought and evaluation. In the Pāli, though, they use different verbs for the thinking that's done at this stage. That'll be the topic for tomorrow morning.

There are some controversies about what constitutes jhāna. For example, some people say that you should have no sense of your body, no sense of the world outside at all. But if you weren't aware of your body, then the Buddha wouldn't have used his repeated images of full-body awareness. As for the world outside, you know it's still there, but you just don't pay attention to it.

I noticed when watching Ajaan Fuang teaching people, that between the first jhāna and the fourth jhāna, different people would experience the steps in different ways: how they felt the breath, how they felt the energies in the body. And in the Canon itself, some passages say that there are two steps between step one and step four, and some say there are three. But the only two steps that are pretty objective—where you can say, "Yes, this is the this jhāna, this is that jhāna"—are these: With the first jhāna, you really are totally absorbed in analyzing the breath and working with the breath. You know that you've gone beyond the first jhāna when you feel totally absorbed in the breath without even thinking discursively about it. You're fused with breath. There's a sense of unification between the awareness and the breath itself. That's the second jhāna.

The other objective sign is in the fourth jhāna, when the breath stops. The important thing is that you don't try to make it stop, because it won't stay. It has to happen naturally. The other problem that comes is when you realize you haven't been breathing for a while and you say, "Wait a minute, I'm going to die." You're not going to die. You have to remind yourself that the breath originates from within the body, and if the body needs to breathe, it's going to breathe. There is some controversy as to how much oxygen actually is

absorbed by the skin at this stage, but it seems that when the mind settles down in the state of the fourth jhāna, the pores of the skin open up. You can tell yourself, "If the body needs any oxygen, it can get it through the skin" because the part of the body that uses the most oxygen is the brain. When the brain is very still, it's using less oxygen. So don't be afraid. You're not going to die in fourth jhāna. And even if you do, you're going to go to a good place. You have some monks right here who will chant for you.

So those are the four jhānas. Tomorrow we'll talk about how you use jhāna in order to gain insight. But again, the short lesson for today is: The way I've been teaching you to work with the breath is how you can get into jhāna. And as for moving from one jhāna to another, it basically comes down to asking yourself, "In this state of stillness I have here, is there still some disturbance? What am I doing to perturb that stillness? And what can I do to stop?" Basically that's how you go from one level of jhāna to the next. Whether there are four steps or fifteen steps between your first jhāna and your fourth jhāna, it doesn't matter. It's your jhāna. And eventually that's what it's all about: exploring how you sense your own body and mind, and how you can bring them together.

Q & A

Q: To what extent does our sense of the breath need to be synchronized with the physical in-and-out frequency? Just recently I had the notion of an in-out movement that wasn't aligned with the actual breathing. And also a sense of energy running quickly in a circle, down the arms, up the legs and spine, and then down again. Is all this fine if it is pleasant? Can I forget about what the coarse breath is doing?

A: As long as the different energies in the body seem not to be working at cross-purposes, this is fine. You have to remember here that the movement of the blood is going through the body all the time. And there will be different parts of the body independently breathing in and out. There are also breath energies that propagate at different speeds: There's one, for instance, that courses through the entire nervous system as soon as the in-breath starts. So the sensations of the breath can follow a variety of rhythms. As long as they're not interfering with one another, that's fine.

Q: Thank you for your advice on dealing with head/throat tension. I've been experimenting with what you said, and it feels like when I try to direct some of the built-up energy out of my eyes, there's a slight shift. The issue I'm running into now is that it feels like it no longer works or even builds up more pressure. Is there anything else I could try?

A: There are many other things you can try. One is to think of the tightness going down the throat, down through the chest, and then disappearing out the heart. Another is to allow the tension to stay there, and then, as you're breathing in, think of the breath energy entering the tension from every direction, going deep into the tension, instead of being pulled someplace else. See if that loosens things up. If those approaches don't work, then come back again.

Q: When in pain and chasing it with the breath while also trying to dis-identify with it, I find it hard to also maintain a point of stillness in addition to that. Is that okay and should I just accept it? Sometimes, rarely, it does then settle down to a stillness, but not often.

A: It's best to try to maintain your sense of being centered with that center of calm, even when there's pain. Then think of the good energy spreading from the calm center out through the pain. The basis of this skill has to come from a sense of the a center and a comfortable energy at least someplace in the body. If you lose that sense of the still center, then you don't have the proper tools for dealing with the pain.

With both of the questions we had just now, you have to realize that we have a tendency to grab onto pain and store it up. That causes it to build up. Ajaan Lee's image is of trying to plow a field, and as the dirt falls off the plow as you go along, you put it in a bag. Of course, you're going to get weighed down. Let the dirt fall where it's going to go and leave it behind while you just keep going forward. In other words, let the pain fall off to the side, but you keep going forward with your concentration.

Q: Dear Ajaan, having entered jhāna number one a few months ago, I've been wondering how to think about it in a way that's skillful. I feel like, with jhāna meditation, it's probably best not to bring it to mind in order to not create desire. What's your advice?

A: The question is how much can you remember of what you *did* in order to get into jhāna that one time? If you can remember the steps you followed, try them again. If you can't remember, just put the whole memory aside. Of course, you're going to have a desire to get into jhāna. That's what we talked about last night. So remember, where should you focus the desire? Try to focus it back on the causes and not in your memories that don't give you any information. And don't make jhāna the focus of your concentration. Focus on the breath.

Q: Is there any difference between pīti that comes "naturally" or of its own and pīti that is "triggered," like pushing a button? Are the effects on the body, etc., the same?

A: There's no difference. If you can turn it on and turn it off at will, then learn to be skilled at when to turn it on and, when it gets too much, turn it off.

Q: Ajaan, thank you for coming all the way from SoCal. Like many retreats I have done, I get to lots of pīti, pleasant physical sensations, but rarely do I go beyond. Sometimes the pīti is so intense I can barely stand it. I have tried spreading it out through the body, but usually the intensity just burns out. Is there any way to work with this intense pīti to go into the first jhāna, or better, the second one?

A: Why not go for the third? The best way to deal with these feelings when they become too intense is to try to focus your awareness on a level of energy that's more refined. It's like tuning a radio. There are the different frequencies of the radio stations around you coming through this room all at once, all at the same time. You try to focus just on the frequency that you want. Tell yourself that these intense sensations that you have are one frequency, but there are other energies in the body at the present moment whose frequencies are actually calm. Focus on one of those. With these intense energies, think of Ajaan Lee's image of the plow. Don't stuff them in the bag as your one kind of meditation. Let them fall to the side. Then pick them up only when you need them.

Q: When we're working with these mettā wishes, are they a process of self-conditioning, or are they real vows? In the second hypothesis, I suppose that to be efficient, they have to be sincere. How to be sincere with regard to beings we don't know? And even worse, how to be sincere when we don't even know that such beings exist, i.e., in the lower realms or the devas?

A: Actually, with mettā, you're trying to establish your intention that whoever you meet, you will treat them with goodwill, because you know that if you have ill will, you'll probably do something unskillful, and that will become your bad kamma. As you go through the world, you're going to meet many people you haven't met before, so you have to be prepared to have goodwill for them, too. As for the beings whose existence you doubt, just be prepared that someday you might meet up with them, and you should be prepared to have goodwill for them.

We've had a couple of people talking about beings who come to them in their meditation, and in cases like that, your response should be goodwill for whoever they may be. Then basically ask them, "Please go away," because you have work to do. They can't awaken you for you. So wish them well, thank them for whatever goodwill they have for you, and then let them depart.

Q: Talking about this guided meditation this morning, it was a surprise for me, because when you talked about the beings in the lower realms, you put the animals in the same category with the hungry ghosts and other species that are manifested as evil. That really did hurt me on several levels. First, in my understanding of Buddhism, this is paradoxical. And second, I think that this is so demeaning, this hierarchy of views. This is what creates so much strife in our societies. And third, classing animals with ghosts—does that mean friendly ghosts? Could you explain?

A: They actually do have a hierarchy in Buddhism, not so much as to whether beings are good or bad, but as to how much they suffer, and animals do suffer a lot more than human beings. If you try to explain the Dhamma to them, they don't understand. There are a lot of things that they're confused about that you cannot explain to them. In the Buddhist hierarchy, you can actually explain things to hungry ghosts. And again, the texts talk about the ghosts not so much as being evil or scary, but simply as pitiful. So, recognize that there are different levels of suffering in this world, and we have goodwill for them all.

Q: We're practicing mindfulness throughout the day, and it works really well. However, on my one-hour lunch walk, I noticed that my mind really wants to think through some issues to find new solutions from a Dhamma perspective. How can I know whether I should give it this last piece of freedom to do what it wants, or keep prioritizing the focus on the breath?

A: You might decide that you have a particular problem that you want to think through, say, during the last 15 minutes of your one-hour lunch walk. So first give yourself 45 minutes of mindfulness in the present moment, and then the last 15 minutes to think through whatever problem you plan to think through. The 45 minutes of mindfulness and concentration should help you

think more clearly about the issue in the last 15 minutes. Now, if you find that you cannot stop after the 15 minutes, that's a sign you shouldn't be doing this yet. You can save that issue for the very end of the retreat.

Q: You said that Ajaan Lee sometimes said to himself, "I'm going to meditate on this" when he wanted to understand something. Do you know how he did this? In this case, did he concentrate only on his breath, or only on the topic that he was trying to understand, or something else?

A: He would pose the question in his mind, then he would put it to the side, and he would focus his mind entirely on his breath. When he came out of meditation, sometimes the answer would be there. Sometimes he would have to think it through. But he would be very strict with himself while he was in concentration to stay iwith the breath. Even if he had to think the problem through, the fact that he had just come out of concentration meant that his mind was clearer than it would have been otherwise.

Q: In Method Two, Ajaan Lee says, "Learn to know the points of focus of the mind that are also the resting spots of the breath, i.e., first the tip of the nose, the middle of the head (by the way, where is the middle of the head?), or the palate, etc." Would you explain what this means and what we have to do with it?

A: These are spots from which there's a sensation that the breath is emanating. For different people, they will be slightly different, and they don't have to be too precise. When Ajaan Lee talks about the middle of the head, imagine a line going through the head from side to side, connecting points just in front of your ears. Imagine another line that goes from the spot between your eyes to the back of the skull. Where those two lines intersect, that's the middle of the head. Another important spot is at the tip of the breastbone, and another is just above the navel. But wherever you feel that the breath emanates, that's where you should focus your attention.

Q: Dear Ajaan, how to explain that the quality of my sleep will vary greatly during retreats? I sleep less soundly, I wake up several times, and yet I'm not tired in the morning. What does the Buddha say about sleep? Did he sleep, or

was he like the yogis and didn't have to sleep at all? What about you, dear Ajaan, how is your sleep?

The second question is: If, during my meditation, I manage to concentrate, and there's joy, and my body is leaning, particularly towards the left, and my head, too, should I redress, straighten it up, or let it do its thing?

A: I'll answer the second question first. Let it lean for a while, and then think of the tension in the left side of your body loosening up, to allow the body to get straighter. In other words, you don't have to force it to straighten up, but just think, "There must be some tension that's pulling me to the left." As you release that tension, the body should straighten out without your increasing any sense of tension on the right side.

As for the fact that your sleep is changing from normal during the meditation retreat, it's normal. You have less information coming in from outside, fewer duties that you have to worry about, so you have less need for sleep. Some people, though, will find that as they come here, this is a chance for them to catch up on a sleep debt, so they will tend to sleep a lot more at the beginning of the retreat. This will vary from person to person.

As for the Buddha, he did sleep. He said that he would sleep about four hours a night. And as for me, how's my sleep? I've been having lots of strange dreams since coming here.

Q: When the nose is blocked and you have to breathe through the mouth, what's a good place to focus on?

A: Focus on the area inside the nose. Remind yourself that even though the air cannot enter, the breath energy can enter there. Think of the breath energy and that the breath channels are opening up as much as possible. I've found that often this actually does unblock the nose.

It's not a good idea to breathe through the mouth very long, though. There have been experiments with people who close off the nostrils and breathe only through the mouth for days at a time. These people get sick very quickly. The nasal channels warm the breath and have chemicals that can kill some germs.

Q: Dear Ajaan, I often find myself in comparison mode. This happens sometimes in regards to material things. "This person has A and I do not."

Sometimes it also happens on the intellectual level, i.e., I notice someone with better knowledge or skill. Feelings then arise and they're usually telling me that I'm not "worth it." This hinders me, and I wonder what a skillful antidote is, maybe mettā?

A: First ask yourself, "What are you competing for?" We're not in competition. Second, spread thoughts of empathetic joy. Their good fortune does not diminish yours. The Buddha would have you remember that in some previous lifetime, you were probably in a position of superiority, too. That thought should give rise to a sense of saṁvega. Saṁvega is basically the feeling that "I've got to get out of saṁsāra." Things go up, things go down, then they go up again, down again. Nothing really goes anywhere.

Q: Dear Ajaan, I notice that I still get pleasure from my work in my professional life. I'm wondering if this pleasure is a sign that there is an attachment there that is persistent, insistent, or an attachment to this identity that I have in my worldly life. I think it is possible to feel joy in practicing the noble eightfold path and in doing good around me, for the people around me. Would that be considered a "delight at work"? Could this be an obstacle to getting to stream-entry?

A: This is a question that could occur only in a Buddhist retreat. "Delight at work"—as in the passage in the readings—means, basically, taking on a job so that you can avoid practicing. The fact that you're finding joy in your work is a good thing. You're very fortunate that you can. This is certainly not an obstruction to the stream-entry. Some people think that you have to get rid of your sense of self in order to enter the stream, but that's not the case. You enter the stream first. You have an experience of the deathless, and that will cut through any tendency to create a sense of self around the five aggregates. So as long as you enjoy practicing on the path, you're fine. The fact that you're able to help people through your occupation is also an aspect of Dhamma practice. You're developing the perfections of generosity, goodwill, and endurance.

Q: I don't understand. I don't really understand. Why do you place so much emphasis on the notion of sensuality? What does it entail? What does it mean?

What realms does it cover? Why do we talk about it so often? Could you please enlighten me?

A: We talk about sensuality so often because people think about it so often. Sensuality basically means the pleasure that you get out of planning sensual pleasures—the fascination with imagining, "How about making this kind of pizza, as opposed to that kind of pizza? Or this kind of sex, that kind of sex?" The reason we talk about it so much is because it eats at so many people's minds and gets in the way of their settling down in concentration. You need strong medicine against it, because otherwise you don't have time to get the mind into concentration.

They did a study one time with people listening to talks, as at a business conference. They found that most people spent the first five minutes listening to the talk, and the remainder of the hour engaging in sensual fantasies. So if you have to give a talk to businessmen, get all your points into those first five minutes.

Q: Ajaan Lee and Ajaan Chah, two great ajaans, had only a very elementary education. Ajaan Chah pointed out that it was harder to teach Westerners because their minds were so cluttered with thoughts. Therefore, I wondered if and how education could hinder our progress on the path. Would it be a profusion of mental fabrication, or an increased difficulty to come back to the body and to direct experience?

A: We tend not to notice the extent to which Ajaan Lee and Ajaan Chah educated themselves. They had only a few years in government school, but there was also an ecclesiastical education system, and they both took part in that. And they did a lot of independent study on their own.

As for Westerners, Ajaan Fuang once said that Westerners were very difficult to teach because they have a lot of pride and are very stubborn. I asked myself, "How many Westerners has Ajaan Fuang ever met?" There was me, and me, and me.

But as for our tendency to think too much, the problem is basically that it gets us out of touch with our bodies, so we have to spend a lot of time getting reconnected with our bodies. This is why I teach the Ajaan Lee method, because it really gets you grounded in the body very fast.

April 27, 2025, Evening

Delight in the Dhamma

We've talked about how the mind is constantly making value judgments as to which desires are worth following and which ones are not. One of the Buddha's purposes in teaching is to help make us change our standards for what counts as what's worth following and what's not.

So tonight we'll look at one of the strategies he employs, which is delight. In Pāli this is *nandi*. It's the process by which the mind likes to talk to itself about its pleasures to emphasize how good a particular pleasure was so that you'll be more and more inclined to want to go for it again.

Of course, we don't do this just in our minds. Advertising does a lot of this for us. Think of all the magazines devoted to wine, cars, food, guns. In America there's a comic strip called "Calvin and Hobbes," about a child with a fantasy friend, and it once included a whole series devoted to the magazine, *Chewing*. It's all about chewing gum with articles on how to get the most out of your chewing gum experience, how to build up the muscles of your jaws, that kind of thing. It's a satire on the magazines devoted to wine, cars, food, and guns.

The Pāli Canon contains a similar satire on the mindset that goes into developing delight in sensuality. If you think that French literature is obsessed with sensuality, you haven't read Indian literature. Indian aesthetic theory contains long discussions about how to maximize the sensuality of the literary experience while reading or watching a play: what vocabulary and other techniques to use to maximize the sensual experience of the audience.

There's a passage in the Pāli Canon that makes use of all the typical sensual techniques but then subverts them. It starts with a nun going into the forest. A rogue meets up with her. He's the son of a goldsmith, which means he's probably wealthy. He tries to seduce her, and he uses extremely sensual language: some of the most gorgeous language and images in the Pāli Canon.

Now, it turns out that the nun is a non-returner, so she's not interested. She asks him, "What is it about this body of mine that you're so attracted to?" He says, "Your eyes." And he goes on and on and on about her eyes. So she tries to dissuade him. She says, "The eye is just a little ball rolled up with lots of tears and mucus. What could you possibly see in this eye that you like?" He says, "It doesn't matter. I still want it. You have the eyes of a fawn." So she says, "If you want it, then here, take it." She takes out one of her eyes and offers it to him. And of course, that changes his attitude.

This is a case of using sensual language to subvert the whole idea of sensual language. The mood of the piece is very, very sensual, very dream-like, and then she changes it with a jolt of reality.

At the end of the story, the nun goes back to see the Buddha and gets her eye back.

But the point here is that the delight that we take in things can be very dangerous—like the song we talked about last night. You might be saying, "Come on, it's an image," but it's still lying. And a relationship based on lying won't be very stable. That's why a large part of the teaching is to get you so that you're not easily manipulated by language like that. That's one of the Buddha's strategies for dealing with delight.

Another one of his strategies is using delight in a positive way as you develop delight in the idea of following the path to encourage you when you encounter difficulties. Even though he says that delight is one of the causes of suffering, still you have to use it to rouse yourself on the path. After all, the path is a path of action—a path of doing and not simply being. This is why the Buddha had to rouse, urge, and encourage his listeners to stick with the path. By engaging in skillful delight, you're doing the same thing for yourself.

There's a sutta where the Buddha recommends six objects of delight that can provide you with pleasure and happiness as you practice the path in the here and now. In fact, these six objects of delight can motivate you to go all the way to bringing unskillful desires to an end. Even though all forms of delight can cause stress and ultimately will have to be abandoned at the end of the path, still, you first need to delight in the path and its goal so that you get started in the right direction and follow all the way through. At the same time,

these forms of delight are antidotes to unskillful attitudes that could block you on the path.

The six objects of skillful delight are:

one, the Dhamma;
two, developing;
three, abandoning;
four, seclusion;
five, the unafflicted; and
six, non-objectification.

We'll explain these terms later. When you find delight in these things, you counteract the mind's tendency to delight in things that would hold you back from greater pleasures. You learn how to develop a taste for the allure of the path and its goal. Right concentration becomes attractive, as does the idea of experiencing the freedom of nibbāna.

• First in the list is delight in the Dhamma. You can take delight in the fact that there's a Dhamma that gives big answers to the big questions of life, such as aging, illness, death, separation, grief, and despair. It teaches you that your actions are not totally determined by the past or by outside forces. You have the power of choice in your life, and your choices can make a big difference.

The Dhamma also teaches you that no one is imposing a purpose for your life on you. You're free to devote yourself to whatever purpose you want, including the noblest possible purpose, which is a happiness that's totally harmless and reliable.

It also tells us that you have the ability to reach that goal. It teaches you that suffering can be ended through human effort. It explains how we suffer, why we suffer, and how we don't have to suffer. It gives clear, reliable guidance on how to use our drive to shape the present moment through our desires and point it in a safer, rewarding direction. It shows us how to act, speak, and think in skillful ways so as to gain total release. In other words, it gives clear advice on what is skillful, and it reassures us that the effort put into developing skillful actions is well spent.

The Dhamma explains these issues not only clearly but also in an honorable way. As the Buddha said, "The path is admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, and admirable in the end." To begin with, the words of the Dhamma are inspiring. The practice is a noble practice, one in which we engage in developing the noble qualities of our hearts and minds, such as virtue, compassion, and discernment. And the end is total freedom from restrictions of any kind. It's a freedom that's totally harmless. It's a good Dhamma all the way through. Ajaan Maha Bua once said that if people who attained nibbāna could actually take it out and show it to you, you wouldn't want anything else. Every market in the world would go bankrupt.

Delight in the Dhamma helps to counteract the tendency that prefers to delight in the idea that there are no genuinely objective standards for truth, that birth and death are all a big mystery, that right and wrong are simply a matter of different people's opinions, so there's nothing standing in the way of doing whatever you want. Of course, if you adopt that attitude, you give free rein to your greed, anger, and delusion. If good and evil are simply social constructs, you're free to invent your own social constructs. No one can say definitively that you're wrong, because their criticism is just a social construct, too.

But if you leave the processes of birth and death as a mystery, you don't really know what to do to escape suffering. You have no reliable guidance for how to calculate if or for how long the effects of your actions will possibly last. In the Buddha's terms, you're left unprotected and bewildered. You leave unanswered the question to what's our common reaction to pain, "Is there anyone who knows how to bring this pain to an end?" So delight in the Dhamma helps to hold and check these dangerous attitudes—attitudes that lead not just to more saṁsāra, but to some of its worst destinations.

• The next two types of delight are delight in developing and delight in abandoning. These refer to the delight you take in engaging in the struggle to develop skillful qualities and to abandon unskillful qualities in the mind. These are the most fundamental principles of the practice, so fundamental that they were one of the first lessons the Buddha gave to his own son, Rāhula, when Rāhula was still a child. As he told Rāhula, when you can see that your

actions are harmless, both in the immediate present and in the long run, you should take delight in that fact and keep on training.

When you're acting this way, you're being heedful, choosing your actions not according to whether they bring immediate pleasure, but according to whether they bring long-term wealth and happiness. As the Buddha said, your ability to choose the long-term over the short-term good—and to be happy as you make that choice—is a measure of your practical wisdom and discernment.

Delight in developing and abandoning also means that you try to find joy in mastering the practical challenges posed by path, no matter how large or how small. Several people have complained that we've been focusing on the minutia of the body and the breath instead of focusing on awakened awareness, but you're not going to reach awakened awareness unless you master the causal principles leading to suffering, and you won't be able to master causal principles unless you're willing to work with them as they play out in your immediate experience of the body and mind right here and now. If you learn to delight in developing and abandoning, you'll have the energy to master each little step along the way.

To delight in developing and abandoning helps to counteract the mind's tendency to delight in heedlessness. Heedlessness is the callous and apathetic part of the mind that says, "I don't care what happens down the line, I just want what I want right now. Thinking about the future gets in the way of my enjoyment of the present." If you have no sense of heedfulness, you'll leave yourself unguarded, unprotected, and an easy prey for your greed, aversion, and delusion.

To delight in developing and abandoning also counteracts the lazy tendency in the mind that says, "If I can manage to accept my unskillful mind states, then I won't suffer from them. If I don't disturb them, they won't disturb me." You have to remember that the path is a struggle. And the Buddha never taught to accept your craving and clinging. You can do something about them to be free from them: In fact, you have to. You have to comprehend the clinging and abandon the craving. To delight in developing and abandoning helps you to feel up to the challenge and to find the reserves

and strengths within you to recognize obstacles and to enjoy the effort in trying to overcome them.

In the biography that Ajaan Maha Bua wrote on Ajaan Mun, he says that in Ajaan Mun's very last Dhamma talk, he talked about how the path is a battle. Your knowledge of the Dhamma is your weapon. Your forces of concentration are like the food for the soldiers. The question is, "Who's the soldier?" He says, "The soldier is the determination never to come back and be the laughingstock of your defilements ever again." So these two objects of delight, abandoning and developing, help you to find joy in committing to coming out victorious.

The remaining three objects of delight help to guide you in your reflection as you commit. As I said, as you're making a value judgment about your desires, when you keep in mind the fact that there is the real possibility of gaining total freedom from suffering, that alters the cost-benefit analysis.

• The first of these three is the delight in seclusion. This helps to counteract your delight in craving for sensuality and for human entanglement. When the Buddha talks about seclusion, he's referring partly to the physical seclusion that comes when you get away from other people. It is an important part of the path.

He gives a nice image of a bull elephant. When the elephant lives with a herd of elephants, the other elephants eat all of his nice leaves and branches. When he goes down to bathe, they bump into him. When he tries to drink clean water, they've already made it muddy. So he leaves the herd. He gets to eat his leaves and branches. When he goes to bathe, nobody bumps into him. When he wants to drink clean water, he has clean water to drink. And when he feels an itch, he takes a branch and scratches himself.

As the Buddha explains the image, that branch is the practice of jhāna. So think about that when you're practicing jhāna: You're scratching right where it itches.

So physical seclusion is part of what the Buddha is talking about when he talks about delighting in seclusion.

But his main emphasis is on secluding the mind from sensuality by getting it into concentration. When you learn to appreciate the pleasure and rapture that can come when the mind is really concentrated in the present moment and your awareness is filling the body, that offers some skillful alternatives to the tendency to delight in sensual fantasies. You can see that there are better pleasures than those promised by cravings for sensuality flowing like effluents and fermentations freely through the mind. At the same time, you can anticipate how good it would be to attain an even higher level of seclusion that comes when the mind is free from the influence of all defilements.

• Next is delight in the unafflicted. The *unafflicted* is one of the Buddha's names for nibbāna. It highlights the fact that nibbāna is totally devoid of the slightest limitations, constraints, discomfort, or coercion. But even prior to the experience of nibbāna, as you develop concentration to higher and higher levels, you become sensitive to how these higher levels are free from the afflictions of an unconcentrated mind and even from the refined afflictions of the lower levels of concentration. As you develop an appreciation of the higher levels of concentration, you come to look favorably at the prospect of a total absence of affliction in nibbāna.

This helps to counteract the tendency of ignorance to say that suffering is inevitable, that the pleasures of saṁsāra are worth whatever pains and difficulties they entail—or that those pains and difficulties should simply be accepted because you have no other choice.

• Finally, there's delight in non-objectification. *Non-objectification* is another name for nibbāna. It's focused on the fact that it's free from disturbances that come from objectifying yourself and others. "Objectification" is a translation of the word *papañca*, which you may have heard. As the Buddha defines the term, it's the type of thinking that starts with the perception, "I am the thinker." From there, you identify yourself as a being who needs to feed and so needs a certain part of the world to feed on, whether for physical food or for the food of emotions and ideas. This type of thinking proliferates and leads to further becoming. But as the Buddha notes, objectification also leads inevitably to conflict. When you stake your claim to any part of the world, you

have to fight with other people who want to lay claim to that same part of the world to provide themselves with the food they want.

So when you delight in non-objectification, you delight in thinking in terms that avoid that conflict and that promote harmlessness. This inclines you to adopt the viewpoint of the four noble truths with the focus on identifying what is suffering, what is the cause of suffering, what is the cessation of suffering, and what is the path to the cessation of suffering—all inside your heart. These thoughts, as we have noted, have nothing to do with the terms of becoming and they lead to a greater happiness, totally free of conflict.

As you delight in that, you call into question the side of the mind that actually enjoys conflict and competition, the part that likes to assume an identity, taking a stance, laying claim to things, and then fighting off anyone who would dispute that claim. To delight in non-objectification is to see the downside of the desire to exert power over others in the world. So when you can adopt delight in non-objectification, it helps you to counteract craving for becoming.

Those are the six objects of delight. We can map them against the four determinations.

- Delight in the Dhamma is related to the determination on discernment and on truth.
- Delight in developing and abandoning is related to the determination on truth and on relinquishment.
- Delight in seclusion, the unafflictive, and non-objectification relates to the determination on calm.

Now, it may seem paradoxical that the Buddha wants you to use delight in this way. This paradox can be resolved by considering the difference between fabricated happiness and unfabricated happiness. Fabricated happiness, which is happiness dependent on conditions, gets amplified when you talk about it in positive terms to yourself or to others.

For example, when you've had a good meal, you actually derive more pleasure from it when you can exclaim about how good it was, and you can elaborate on why you liked it and why it deserves three stars. That increased pleasure inclines you to want to have similar meals again.

In the same way when you undertake the path—which, after all, is fabricated—you can develop more enthusiasm for it by telling yourself how good the goal will be and how much you want to do whatever is required to get there. When the path begins to yield results in terms of the pleasures of generosity, virtue, and meditation, then the more you consciously take joy in those pleasures, the more likely you'll be to pursue the path even further.

It's for this reason that the Buddha recommends that you delight in practices that help to counteract the pull of your defilements. As I said earlier, this is in line with what the Canon has to say about the Buddha's teaching style in general. In a typical Dhamma talk, he would not only instruct his audience, but also urge, rouse, and encourage them. By doing so, he's showing them how to urge, rouse, and encourage themselves.

The nature of this dynamic changes, though, when the path finally brings you to the unfabricated happiness of nibbāna. Because that happiness is not dependent on conditions, it's not affected by praise or blame—yours or anyone else's. Praise adds nothing to it; criticism takes nothing away. This is why those who have reached this attainment are said to have left delight behind—not because their senses have been dulled, but because they have no need to increase the happiness they've already found.

So the Buddha teaches strategically, advocating delight as it's needed to arrive ultimately at an attainment where the happiness is so great that you don't need delight to encourage yourself with anything further. You've already arrived. There's nothing more you need to do to improve that happiness. Totally free from dependencies, your work is done.

But as long as you haven't reached that point yet, don't be embarrassed to delight in the path of the Dhamma or in your ability to master the skills it requires.

April 28, 2025, Morning

Pitfalls & Opportunities

Yesterday, we talked about getting the mind into jhāna, focusing on the breath, adjusting the breath so that it feels good. Then, when it feels good, you try to maintain that sense of feeling good, and then spread it through the body until you have a sense of the whole body being suffused by good breath energy. Then you maintain that sense of full-body awareness, and eventually you get a sense that the awareness and the breath begin to become one. Instead of watching the breath, you feel like you're bathed in the breath. Eventually the breath gets so calm that it seems the in-and-out breath seems to disappear, and the body is filled with this good, still breath energy. Then you maintain that.

Today I'd like to talk about some of the things that can happen as you develop this skill: some dangers you have to watch out for and some opportunities you want to look for.

One possible occurrence is that you begin to see light. I want to say at the very beginning that if light doesn't appear, don't worry. But if a sense of light does appear, in the beginning, try to maintain your awareness not with the light but with the breath. If the light becomes steady, see if you can get it under your control. First, see if you can make it disappear and then reappear, grow large, grow small. If it's not white, can you make it white or off-white? If you can't, let it go. If it does become white, bring it up close, make it go far away.

Then, when you have it totally under your control, bring it into the body, and you'll find that it'll create a great sense of ease in the body. You may start seeing different organs in the body appearing in the light or you may even see a vision of yourself in the light. If you're meditating on your own, let these visions go away. You can manipulate the light on your own, but the visions require some supervision. Try to stick with the breath.

Another thing that starts to appear to some people in the beginning is that they start seeing beings coming to them. Again, if you're meditating on your own, just send them goodwill and let them go. Sometimes they seem to be well-meaning, but you never know for sure. They don't carry identification papers. And even if they are well-meaning, you have to be cautious. Sometimes they come to share knowledge, but who knows how much they know? Some beings can become devas without knowing much at all. There's a story in Canon of a deva who tries to proposition a monk, which shows you the extent to which devas can be foolish and ignorant. So if any beings come, wish them well and then let them go. If they don't want to go, you don't pay any attention to them. Fill your body with good breath energy and, as Ajaan Lee would say, "Fight them off with goodwill."

Another thing that can happen is that, as you get more and more familiar with the breath and more familiar with these states of concentration, you begin to get a sense that it's not so much that the breath is changing from one state to another. It's simply that, as the mind settles down, you're tuning into different breath energies that exist on different levels in the body. There's a still breath, or a potential for still breath, that's always there, and there are also the frequencies of the breath energies going through the nerves and the blood vessels. You sense that, as your concentration deepens, it's as if you're simply tuning into these different energies that are already there.

It's like tuning a radio. Even as your radio is tuned into the stations that come from Aix, you know that the frequencies that come from Monaco are also always there. It's simply a matter of tuning into them.

This indicates that you're getting more proficient in concentration, but two things can go wrong here. One is that you feel, "Hey, I can tune in at any time." And in the beginning, that's true: When you know the station, you can tune in very quickly. But if you get lazy and heedless, you begin to lose that ability. In other words, it's as if the radio frequencies from Monaco and Aix are still there, but you're not taking good care of your radio and you get to the point where you can't tune in anymore. So you have to be careful not to get heedless.

Another thing that can go wrong is that—as you get a sense of this still awareness that's potentially always there—you develop wrong view about that potential. You think that you've reached the "ground of being" or your already-awakened potential. This is where the idea of "awakened Buddha nature" comes from. Actually, it's just the consciousness aggregate. When you reach a state like this, try to be very careful to watch what fabrications go into maintaining it, because it *is* a fabricated phenomenon. When you see how it's fabricated, you can avoid falling into wrong view about it.

Now, as you get the mind more and more confident in getting still, the Buddha recommends that you start using this concentration to become more mindful and more alert—in particular, becoming more and more alert to what you're doing as you get the mind concentrated and try to maintain that state of concentration. This is where the Buddha has you think in terms of fabrication. And this is how you use jhāna as a basis for insight.

Now, there are two ways in which you can analyze the mind in concentration. One is in terms of the three fabrications we've been talking about: bodily fabrication, which is the breath; verbal fabrication, which is the way you talk to yourself—and here we're talking about how you talk to yourself about the breath and about the state of your mind; and finally, mental fabrications, the perceptions you use to maintain the concentration, and the feelings you're developing as you get the mind still. That's one way of analyzing the fabrications.

Another way is in terms of the five aggregates. It's a very similar type of analysis. Start with form. This would be the way you sense the body from within. Then again, there's feeling, which here is the feeling of pleasure or equanimity you develop with the concentration. Perception, the images you hold in mind to get the mind into concentration and maintain it. Fabrication, which here means the intention to maintain it. And then consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

Now, the Buddha recommends that you analyze the mind into these different types of fabrication—either the three fabrications or the five aggregates—to make you more and more sensitive to what you're actually doing as you're maintaining the concentration. In the beginning of

concentration practice, you're very acutely aware of what you have to do. But as you get more skilled at it, it becomes easier and easier until it gets to the point where it seems automatic. You become less conscious of what you're doing.

So here, the Buddha's trying to make you more and more sensitive again. Even on the more stable levels of concentration, there are subtle levels of fabrication going on. One thing you can try to notice is: Does the level of ease in the concentration go up and down? Is there any disturbance in that ease? When there is a disturbance, what did you just do? In other words, you try to look for more subtle problems, and keep looking at your actions as the source of the problems. That's one way of becoming more sensitive to these subtler levels of fabrication going on in the mind.

As you get better at fabricating these states of concentration, you find that you become more and more addicted to them. In other words, you become more attached to the concentration. You see that this is the best state of mind that you can create.

Now, you can use your attachment to this state of concentration to peel away your attachments to other things, so it's not necessarily a bad thing in the beginning. When you look at anything else that the mind could pursue at any point, you realize you've got something better in your concentrated states of mind.

But after a while, you begin to get tired of the fact that you have to keep on fabricating them. The mind gets more and more inclined to want to find a happiness that doesn't have to be fabricated at all. This is when you start developing some dispassion for the forms and the feelings and the perceptions and the fabrications or intentions, and even the consciousness that make up the concentration. The mind gets inclined to something that it doesn't have to create or maintain. You develop dispassion for these aggregates, so that you're inclined to let go of the concentration and find something better.

Now, when you do this, sometimes you simply get the mind deeper into concentration, although at that moment you may not realize it's just another state of concentration. It's like going from a dark room into a much brighter room. You don't see anything in the new room because the light is so bright.

But as your eyes begin to adjust, you begin to say, “Oh yes, there are things here in this room, too.” What you’re doing is that you’re getting to deeper and deeper layers of fabrication until you’re left with nothing but two fabrications: attention and intention. The mind reaches a point where it realizes, “If I stay here, it’s fabricated. If I go someplace else, it’s going to be fabricated, too. And what’s the alternative to staying and going?” If things come together just right, that’s when there’s an opening to the deathless. You know it’s deathless because there’s no time or space in there. This is why it’s called unborn and undying.

What often happens, though, after people reach this point, is that they get excited. “Wow!” And that pulls you out because you’ve crashed it. But still, it’s an experience of the deathless and it makes a big change in the mind because you realize there was no suffering there, not even the slightest bit of stress at all.

So all your doubts about the Buddha are gone. You see that he was right: There is a deathless dimension, and you attained it by following the path he taught.

You also know that there were no aggregates in there at all, no fabrications at all, which is why you would never identify yourself as any of the aggregates ever again.

You know exactly what you did in order to get there, but you also realize that it was your lack of skill in the past that prevented you from getting there, which is why you would never intentionally break any of the five precepts ever again.

You also know that your experience of time did not begin with the date of your birth. You may not have necessarily gained any visions of previous lifetimes, but in leaving time and space for a while, you’ve seen how far time goes back. Far, far back.

Now, you can do this kind of analysis of the fabrications of jhāna to get to the deathless in one of two ways. One is when you’re within a state of jhāna itself. We talked about this yesterday. It’s like a man standing watching someone who’s sitting down, or a man sitting down watching someone who’s lying down. In other words, you can watch the state of jhāna from within, but

you've stepped slightly out of it, like the hand pulled slightly out of the glove. You can see what the mind is doing, you can see all the different aggregates and fabrications in action, and you can drop them.

Another way you can do this analysis is as you leave one state of jhāna to go into another. As you realize you've moved from one state of fabrication to another state of fabrication, you become very sensitive to the fabrications you've left behind and the fabrications that remain. And again, as you gain a sense of dispassion for the fabrications in either state, you let both of them go.

When you reach the deathless for the first time, you realize that there's more work to do because of that moment of attachment or clinging to it. But you know for sure that what the Buddha said was true, that this path does lead to the deathless. That's what gives you more enthusiasm in the practice. You're much more confident in what you're doing.

So that's the best use of jhāna. I hope all of you can do this. What's important here is that you're not simply going to rest in the present moment, because this experience helps you see how much the present moment is fabricated. Experiencing the deathless helps you see what you've left behind, and there's no sense of the present in that experience. None of the six senses are there. There is a consciousness, but it's not related to any of the six senses.

This is why it's so important that we become sensitive to how the present moment is put together. Sometimes we're told that the purpose of the practice is to get fully into the present moment, but the Buddha never taught that. He said you come to the present because there's work to be done in the present, particularly to see how you're fabricating it. You get the mind into jhāna to get more sensitive to that fact, and you use your states of concentration until you get to the point where you can abandon all those fabrications. That's when you see what's left after you've left the present moment.

From this point on, your relationship to the present moment will be different. One, you realize the extent to which your intentions are needed for you to experience the present moment. And two, you see how important it is that you choose your intentions wisely. You know there's more work to be done, but you also know you're on the right path.

In a few minutes we'll start our walking meditation period. Again, we'll do 45 minutes. But before we do, I'd like to make reference to one of the questions that came up yesterday. One of you has complained that during the retreat you get to a point where you tend to yawn a lot. You feel that you're not getting enough oxygen. This is a problem that comes when we have a very sedentary retreat like this. The mind gets quiet, you sit and you walk slowly, and as you sit and walk slowly, your blood pressure goes down, your heart rate goes down—which, for some people, is what they need. But for some people it's too much. So it's a good idea during the walking meditation period to do some fast walking, at least for a while. Or else you can find a way of getting some exercise during the course of the day, something to raise your heart rate. That should help solve the problem.

April 28, 2025, Afternoon

Q & A

Q: Dear Ajaan, I understood recently that the five khandhas are what constitutes our ego. Listening to Ajaan Sumedho, I discovered the existence of a consciousness that exists beyond the classical "me." I'm trying as much as possible to find refuge in this unconditioned consciousness. It's difficult. I have trouble understanding the goal of these exercises of working with the breath and the energies in the body. All this work to develop a consciousness of the body, when what I was looking for is to connect to the consciousness that's not conditioned, universal, without self and without death. Forgive me, Ajaan, for this question that's a little confused.

A: There are many levels of the aggregates. Some of them you see clearly, as in your ordinary, everyday consciousness. Others that are more subtle you're not going to see until you get the mind into good concentration. To get beyond those aggregates, you first have to get the mind into concentration, and then you have to go beyond the level of consciousness in concentration, too, because that's included in the consciousness aggregate as well. Only then will you encounter the consciousness that's outside of the aggregates.

Now, the consciousness of awakening and the consciousness that Ajaan Sumedho is talking about are two different things. The consciousness that he says is unconditioned is actually part of the consciousness aggregate. It's a very stable form of that consciousness, but it does still have conditions and it still has a lot of subtle fabrication, whereas awakened consciousness is apart from all that.

Ajaan Chah was once asked about this issue, "Is this state of consciousness that you call the 'knower' the same thing as awakened consciousness?" He replied, "No, of course not." There's an interesting passage in the book *Still, Flowing Water*, in a talk called "The Knower." It's a conversation between Ajaan Chah and one of his Western students, a French monk, who was trying to pin Ajaan Chah down: "What exactly do you mean by these terms?" It seems as if it

was the first time anybody asked that question of Ajaan Chah. He needed a French monk to challenge him to be more precise.

The point is that the consciousness of awakening has nothing to do with your ordinary, everyday consciousness. It has no awareness of the aggregates, no awareness of the six senses. Remember the image I gave you last night of the ditch by the side of the road going to the Grand Canyon? The consciousness that surrounds your awareness right here, that seems to be unconditioned, is like the ditch on the side of the road. The genuine deathless is like the Grand Canyon. So it's up to you: Do you want to content yourself with the ditch or do you want the Grand Canyon?

Q: Ajaan, thank you. Today you talked about the deathless. In this state of jhāna, you said that there was no more time and space. No more time, I can understand. But no more space is a little more troublesome for me. If there's no more space, then where does this pure consciousness abide? Would you please be a little more specific and enlighten me?

A: To begin with, the deathless is not a state of jhāna. It's something that can be attained by taking a state of jhāna apart. As for the fact that it has no sense of space: The Buddha said that our sense of space and locations depends on our craving. Wherever your craving is focused, that's where your mind is located. When there's no more desire, there's no location. There's no here or there. You remember, when you arrived at this state, that you had the choice between either staying in place or going someplace else. "Here" and "there" are concepts that define space. When there's no here, no there, then there is no space. When there's no space, consciousness doesn't have to abide anywhere.

Now, thinking about this is not going to get you there. So, focus instead on the path that leads there. And especially pay attention to where your cravings are located. That insight will be part of the path that takes you there.

Q: Ajaan, do all meditations have to have an object?

A: Yes. Some states of stillness seem to have no object either because you're not very well focused, or your perception of your focus itself may not be very clear. So try to be very clear about where your mind is located, keeping in mind

that it may be on a perception of consciousness or a perception of nothingness. The only kind of consciousness that does not have an object is the consciousness of awakening.

The Buddha's image is of a light beam. He asked the monks one day, "Suppose there's a house with a window in the east wall, and a wall on the west. The sun rises. When the ray of sunlight goes through the eastern window, where does it land?" "It lands on the western wall." "When there's no western wall, where does it land?" "It lands on the ground." "And if there's no ground, where does it land?" "It lands on the water." "If there's no water, where does it land?" "It doesn't land." The ray of light that doesn't land is the Buddha's image for the awakened consciousness.

Think about that. At night, you look up in the sky. It seems dark, but it's full of light beams. The only reason we don't see those light beams is because there's nothing to reflect them. That doesn't mean the beams are not there. It's simply that they have no place to land.

Q: My mind has a tendency to spend time working through blockages more so than it does spreading pleasant sensations through the parts that are not blocked. Is that okay? How does one find the right balance and when do I know that it's okay to leave a blockage blocked?

A: You have to remember that when you're working through blockages, you have to have something positive to work through them. In some cases, simply changing the perception will change the blockage. Try to see it as more permeable, and hold in mind the perception that the breath precedes the blockage. But more frequently, you'll need to have good energy to send through the blockage. So try to stay in touch with that positive energy, even as you're working through blockages. If, after about five minutes the blockage doesn't dissolve away, move on. You'll find sometimes that there are certain blockages that just do not respond at all. In a case like that, don't try to work through them. Just allow good energy to go around them. It's as if that part of the body doesn't trust you. So you show that you're trustworthy by treating it gently. At some point, it just may dissolve.

Q: Good morning, Than Ajaan. When you said that your feet have been falling asleep for 55 years, and that when you're young, it's good to learn to teach your body to sit cross-legged, this motivated me to try, and I'm happy about it. However, at times, this really, really hurts in my legs and knees. Now they're not asleep anymore. It's pure pain. Is this a pain you know? Should I sit through it? Will it go away? Or is it good to learn how to deal with this during meditation "to prepare for other pains that will come later"? In any case, when I have this, I am in no way relaxed. Thank you very much.

A: If you find it very hard to keep your mind concentrated in the face of the pain, very gradually change position. You can work through the pain best when the mind is well concentrated. Don't move right away. Give yourself five or ten minutes with the pain. If you find that your concentration still cannot settle down, then shift your posture. Also keep in mind the fact that pain in the knee often has to do with the fact that other muscles in the body are not properly relaxed. Oftentimes the muscles in the thighs, the hips, or the back are also involved. So, learn some yoga to stretch your legs and get them limber, because you want to make sure that you don't damage your knees.

Q: After experimenting a bit, it seems like the only way I'm able to breathe through certain tension in my face and throat is to zoom in and deal in smaller areas. What's interesting is that I'm noticing lots and lots of knots that will seemingly twitch involuntarily if I put energy there. What is happening? Should I allow it? Also, do I need to overcome this tension to reach jhāna?

A: I'll answer the second question first, which is, you do not have to overcome the tension in order to reach jhāna. You can think of the breath energy working around the tension as you don't go into it. Another technique is to imagine taking out a big knife and slicing through all the bands of tension, cutting them into little pieces.

As for the twitching, that's perfectly natural. Don't try to stop it, but don't encourage it. After a while, it'll go away on its own.

Q: Than Ajaan, in certain cases, I noticed that you were using the words *desire* and *thought* as if they were almost interchangeable. Are thoughts considered a form of verbal fabrication or mental fabrication?

A: They're considered both. And, yes, there is an element of desire and fabrication in all thoughts. Some thoughts come into the mind unbidden, in which case they're actually the result of old desires. What you're going to do with them now is based on current desires.

Q: So, *citta*, the Pāli word, means the mind but also the heart. Does it encompass the whole of the meditation practice? Is the citta that which contains everything?

Q: The citta contains all your thoughts and all your volitions. All your thoughts have desires within them and all your desires have their thoughts. So from the point of view of the Canon, there's no difference between the mind and heart. In meditation, you're training both.

Q: If there's a complex thought arising that seems "mixed" during jhāna two or three, and it takes you further into concentration, can you deduce that it would also be skillful outside of that context? Likewise, if a thought takes you further away from concentration, that it's unskillful?

A: This is one of those questions where I'd like to question the person who asked it. What kind of mixed thought are we talking about? If, in the course of meditating, you find that a thought helps you get more concentrated, it is skillful in that context, but it may not be skillful in other contexts. In the same way, sometimes there are some thoughts that take you away from concentration, but they're actually skillful, depending on the purpose you have in thinking them—as when you're running a business and you've got some issues you've got to think through.

Q: Thank you for this presentation on jhāna. I still have a couple of questions. One, can we enter into jhāna very briefly and then go out and then do that again several times? Or is this not yet the first jhāna? And two, is the rapture something stable or can it be fleeting? It happens to me sometimes that there's a chill that runs through my body like a wave. Is that pīti or is this just an energy?

A: In the first case, the object of jhāna is something that we've focused on many times in the past. What makes it jhāna is when you're there steadily with

it. Think of the image of the steady flame. In other words, when you get a flickering flame to become steady, it's not the case that you've taken the flame to some place you've never been before. You just realize that you're now there steadily. As for the feelings of rapture, sometimes they are fleeting, whether you're in jhāna or not. The important thing is that you find that your focus is really steadily with the object. That's what makes it jhāna.

Q: When working with the breath and body, my mind is accustomed to using yoga concepts such as chakras and prāna. Are these useful perceptions to use in meditation? Or are there drawbacks to using yogic concepts in the practice?

A: The Pāli word *pāna* in *ānāpānasati* is actually related to the Sanskrit, *prāna*. So basically we have the same concept. It means breath. As for the chakras, you'll notice that when Ajaan Lee talks about the resting spots of the breath, many of them correspond to the chakras. So they can be useful concepts. One concept we don't use, though, is kundalini. We're not trying to get the energy in the base of the spine to go running up the spine. For some people it gets disorienting. So simply open up the energy channels in your spine and let the energy flow smoothly and naturally.

Q: "May I be happy." Isn't that conditioned? It sounds like modern positive thinking.

A: Yes, of course it's conditioned. You're trying to condition your will here to aim at a harmless happiness. Many of the Asian ajaans have found it very difficult to understand why Westerners have such problems wishing themselves well, the conclusion being that Westerners feel they're not worthy of happiness. But we've found that as TV and the Internet have gone to Asia, people are having the same problem with the younger generation there as well, because advertisers are telling them, "You're not good enough, you're not good enough, but if you buy our stuff, you'll get better." This has a bad effect on people's attitude toward themselves. So to counteract that impact, you do have to think consciously, "May I be happy."

Then think within the Buddhist context and the teaching on kamma: How are you going to be happy? By being generous, by being virtuous, and by

meditating. So you're not just doing positive thinking, you're also following it up with positive action.

Q: Is it the case that in the jhānas, first or higher, we still hear sounds and still feel pain? Second question, does pain constitute an obstacle to entering the first jhāna? Third question, some people say they can get out of their body while meditating. Is that possible? And how does that relate to the jhānas?

A: One, it is possible to hear sounds and also to feel pains while you're in jhāna, but they don't affect the mind. You know there's pain in the knee, but it doesn't really affect your mind. This *does* become an obstacle to the jhāna if you're focused on pain, which is why I recommend that you start out by focusing on the comfortable parts of the body.

As for leaving your body, don't. It's pretty dangerous. One, you may not be able to get back in. Two, when you're out of your body, somebody else may come in. Neither of which you want.

I have a student who found that he had left his body one evening while meditating after working all day. He lay down to meditate and suddenly he was out of his body, up at the ceiling, looking down at his body. His first thought was, "Cool." So he said to himself, "Let's go outside." He was sleeping in the ordination hall at the monastery, but all the windows were closed. And in his incorporeal state, he couldn't push the windows open. So he found himself back in his body.

The next day, he tried it again, but before lying down, he opened the windows. He left his body and just as he was about to go out the window, he had a vision of Ajaan Lee, who said, "Get the hell back in there. It's dangerous out here."

If you do find that you've left your body, the first thing to do is to get back in. The way to do that is to think of the different elements in the body. You've got the breath. You've got the warmth, which is symbolized by fire. You've got the coolness in the body, which is symbolized by water. You've got the solidity in the body, which is symbolized by earth. So think of these properties of the body in that order—breath, fire, water, earth—and that will get you back in.

Q: Two questions. One, at which stage do we get out of time and space? Two, which jhāna allows us to enter into the stream?

A: The answer to both questions is basically the same. You first step outside of time and space when you gain the first stage of awakening, entering the stream. This can come about through contemplating any of the states of jhāna. Apparently, the people who gained awakening while listening to the Buddha give a Dhamma talk were in first jhāna. It takes a lot of discernment in order to do that. It's more likely that you'll gain awakening from a deeper state of concentration.

Q: Friday, right before we talked about the jhānas, I had an experience of a very strange and particular meditation with a global and very pleasant feeling. I was not feeling the boundaries of my body, kind of blurry with spaces in there, like a cloud that is not very dense. I was not feeling my breath anymore. I couldn't find any in-breath or out-breath. Can that correspond to one of the jhānas? And if yes, what should I have done? Since I was so surprised, I got out of that state.

A: This could be any number of things. When you find yourself in a state that you're not really sure about, go back to the breath and the body scan. And try to be very alert to what you're doing, because it's the alertness that allows you to gain insight from the jhānas.

Q: Can one experience several glimpses of nibbāna and remain at the same stage of awakening?

A: If you don't get any more discernment, then you just keep going through the same stage of awakening. So you can't say, "One, two, three, four: I must be an arahant." You really do have to develop your discernment more.

Q: After doing this practice of scanning the body, I establish myself in the practice of ānāpānasati, where I can stay for two hours and get to a really good state of samādhi. I would like to know how or what to do at that stage to progress in my meditation to the level of the five aggregates. It's been several months that, after having obtained a necessary amount of calm, I direct my introspection to the five aggregates. You said that you have to be anchored in

the body through the practice. After being anchored in the body, being in a good state of samadhi, what does one do with the aggregates?

A: You try to observe the state of concentration around the breath and see if you can see which of the aggregates are participating in that state of concentration. All five should be there. The breath is form. The feeling of pleasure is feeling. The perceptions you have of the breath and the body and the mind are perceptions. Your intention to stay there would be fabrication. And then you've got the consciousness, which is aware of all these things. Can you see these as individual actions? If you can't, then just go back to concentration. If you can, try to develop that ability even further.

Q: How to teach children meditation? When to begin?

A: You can start with a child around four or five. First teach thoughts of mettā. Every evening before the child goes to bed, have him spread thoughts of goodwill to himself, parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, the dog and the cat, and his friends.

When the child is about seven, then you can teach him breath meditation. Basically have him follow the feelings of breath wherever he feels them in the body. If he has the sensation of light, have him focus on it. Make sure that it's white, even as he maintains his attention to the breath, and then allow that light to come into the body. Children tend to experience light more often than adults do.

Q: The second question had to do with teaching music to a child. The person asking the question seemed to be afraid that she was getting the child attached to sensuality.

A: Whether you teach them or don't teach them, children are going to get attached to sensuality. What you want to do is teach the child a skill, because learning a manual or artistic skill teaches many of the character traits needed to master the skills of meditation. And, in fact, music is one of the best skills to develop. It's not necessarily the case that a child who learns how to master a musical instrument will be attached to sensuality for the rest of his or her life. Quite a few of the monks at our monastery were musicians, including the two sitting in front of you. We also have two former graphic artists. Oftentimes,

mastering a skill like that gets them more interested in other, more interesting skills. One of the monks who was a musician realized that, if he stayed a musician, he was going to be spending the rest of his life playing music, but not necessarily the music he wanted to play. That gave rise to a strong sense of disillusionment. And now he's a monk.

April 28, 2025, Evening

Selves & Worlds on the Path

The Buddha taught that our sense of self is a construct. Some people don't like to hear this—especially when they hear that the Buddha also teaches, "not-self." It sounds as if he's trying to annihilate our sense of self, saying that it's no more than a harmful fiction. But actually, he wants us to use our sense of self as an important part of the path. After all, we have to desire the path in order to do it, and wherever there's a desire, there's going to be a sense of the world in which that desire can be fulfilled, and a sense of our self acting in that world. That's the nature of becoming.

So basically, when he says the self is a construct, he's saying that we may have constructed it unskillfully in the past, but we can learn to construct a skillful sense of self as a strategy for the sake of happiness, for attaining the main thing that we desire: the end of suffering.

As we follow the path, he recommends that we create a sense of self that's capable of doing the path, ultimately to get us to a point where we don't need that sense of self anymore. It's served its purpose. And as Ajaan Suwat once said, once you attain the ultimate happiness, you don't ask the question, "Who's experiencing this happiness?" There's no need to ask. The happiness is that satisfying and intense. Even those who come back from their first experience of the deathless have a strong sense of what intense happiness it is. And as Ajaan Fuang said, once you come back from that experience, you realize how much stress there is in the experience of the six senses, even in the pleasures of the senses.

So when the Buddha says "not-self," he's not telling us to throw away something of value. He's basically saying, "Learn how to create a better sense of self—one that's so good that it'll eventually take you to a happiness where you don't need to use it anymore."

Now, sometimes you hear it said that if you think that you're doing the path, that's wrong view, that you should see the path as developing on its own. But how can that be true? If it's true, then the Buddha had wrong view, because he often talked about the role of a healthy sense of self in developing the path. Even when he teaches not-self, he tells you to be confident that you will benefit from following that teaching. As he once said to the monks, "Whatever is not yours, let go of it. That will be for your long-term welfare and happiness."

As we said on the first night of the retreat, the path is not a mushroom that sprouts on its own in the forest. It's not a path of just letting go. It involves developing skillful qualities, and those qualities don't develop on their own.

For the path to succeed, you have to follow the Buddha's five-step program for evaluating desires. You may remember the five steps: to see the origination, to see the passing away, to see the allure, to see the drawbacks, and to find the escape. Those steps in turn require that you develop a strong healthy sense of self that can argue the case for the desire to put an end to suffering to defeat your old senses of self and their associated desires that might stand in the way. Now, you may feel some affection for those old senses of you. But when you see that they're actually placing limitations on you, you'll be more willing to put them aside.

So tonight I'd like to talk about what the Buddha says about how to develop a healthy sense of self on the path that allows you to sense that you're capable of much more than you think you are, and you'll enjoy the results of the path more than you can imagine. In particular, I'd like to consider the themes we've discussed so far—the four determinations, the desires of the noble eightfold path, the four bases for success, and the six objects of delight—to see how they can help you develop a strong sense of self that can carry through with the overarching desire to put an end to suffering.

Now, to talk of creating a new sense of self may sound artificial, but remember that your current sense of self is already a construct—actually, many constructs built out of your many old habits. These are the habits you've developed in ignorance over many lifetimes, and the results have been at best a mixed bag. It is possible to develop new habits, even when you're old. In

English, we have an old saying, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” but you’re not a dog. As the Thai ajaans like to say, “As long as you’re breathing, you can still learn new skills in the mind.” And as the Buddha says, “To define yourself is to limit yourself.” So why hold on to a sense of yourself that limits your ability to end suffering?

Note that in recommending that you develop new self-habits, the Buddha isn’t suggesting you replace one definition of yourself with another definition, because that might possibly be limiting, too. Instead, he recommends identifying with skillful habits. In other words, he wants you to be less concerned with what you *are* and more concerned with what you can *do:* the skillful habits you can develop.

As you remember, we’ve also talked about the three main roles that your sense of self plays in promoting any desire: the agent, the consumer, and the commentator. The consumer is the part of you that says, “This is what I want.” The agent is the part that feels, “I can act to bring that about.” And the commentator makes a running commentary on how well the other two senses of self are doing. The desire for the end of suffering requires that you train each of these senses of self so that it can actually help to attain that desire. When you train all three with the lessons you’ve learned through the four determinations, the noble eightfold path, the four bases for success, and the six objects of delight, they’ll be up to the task.

In every case, you have to remember that when you’re training your different senses of self, you’re actually assuming their roles as they talk among themselves. So you have to use the principles of right speech in every case: You want to say things to yourself—or yourselves—that are true, beneficial, and timely. That helps to make your inner conversation part of the noble eightfold path. How those principles will apply in practice will depend on which sense of self you’re talking to.

Remember, too, that every sense of self operates as part of a state of becoming, and states of becoming form around desires. This means that your various senses of self are defined by the desires that lie at their core. If you want them to lead to the highest happiness, they all have to be informed by the desires expressed in the four determinations. In other words, you have to

identify with the overriding desire expressed in these determinations. Your sense of self as consumer should aim at the determinations expressed as features of the *goal*, which means aiming at the highest noble truth and calm, i.e., the truth and calm of unbinding. If that seems too far away, then, at the very least, be discerning enough to aim at long-term welfare and happiness. As for you sense of self as agent, that should be defined around the four determinations expressed as *means* to the goal: not to neglect the discernment; to guard the truth; to be devoted to relinquishment; and to train only for calm.

Those are the general principles. Now let's look at how they apply in detail.

First, your sense of self as an agent: The Canon recommends that you develop a healthy sense that you're capable of following the path, that you're responsible for your actions, and that your actions can make the difference between suffering and not suffering. In other words, you're competent to do the path, and you should develop a sense of confidence in your own abilities to do it. Ven. Ānanda once recommended to a nun that she develop this attitude, "There are those who have reached awakening. They're human beings. I'm a human being. If they can do it, why can't I?"

And you learn how to take pride in developing skills.

Now, there are two types of pride. There's healthy pride, comparing yourself with yourself in terms of where you are now as opposed to where you were before you started practicing. You can also compare yourself with others if your motivation is to see what you can learn from them. Here your sense of pride is healthy in that you take pride in how you're improving and in how you're always willing to learn how to improve further. Unhealthy pride compares you with others to see if you're better than they are. So the healthy sense of pride is what you're aiming at.

To abandon an unhealthy sense of pride, remember from the four determinations that you're training in relinquishment to let go of the pride that gets in the way. And you learn from the four bases for success that you need to commit to the practice in terms of your desire, your persistence, and your intent.

You also have to see that with competence comes responsibility. You can cause great harm to yourself and to others, not only in this lifetime, but also in

lifetimes to come. There's a passage in the Dhammapada that makes this point. "Whatever an enemy might do to an enemy, or a foe to a foe, the ill-directed mind can do you even worse. Whatever a mother, father, or other kinsman might do for you, the well-directed mind can do you even better." This is why the Buddha has your sense of self as an agent develop two qualities: compunction and heedfulness.

Compunction is basically the fear of causing harm to yourself and to others. This is a skillful sense of fear, and it comes with a sense of power. You have this sense of power and you want to use it well.

Heedfulness is similar. You realize that there are dangers, especially dangers in what you might do unskillfully. But heedfulness also contains an element of hope: If you're heedful and careful, you can avoid harm and create happiness.

That's your sense of self as agent.

You also remember that becoming includes not only a sense of you as agent, but also a sense of the world in which the agent functions, and that you create a sense of the world by the things you desire. So if you focus on the best things to desire, that puts you in a better world. In other words, if all you think about is how much money you can make, you end up in a world where there are just people who want to make money: Either those are the people you actually associate with or that's how you view people in general. If you want to find the end of suffering, you find yourself associating with better and better people.

So, try to keep this power in mind: that you create your sense of self and you also create your sense of the world you live in. And remember that the best use of that power is to understand the processes leading to becoming so that you can point them in the right direction and then ultimately free yourself through dispassion.

This relates directly to your sense of self as a consumer. You want to have high standards for the happiness you're aiming at. Don't settle for desires that pull the mind down to a low level. At the very least, aim at being able to continue to practice the Dhamma, now and through the end of this life when options are presented to you.

Many years back, I was electrocuted and almost died. The first thought that went through my mind was, "I'm going to die from my own stupidity." I hadn't checked the plug. The next thought that went through my mind was, "I can't think those thoughts right now if I'm dying. I've been meditating. I should use my meditation." Then it was as if a whole series of doors appeared in front of me. I had a few glimpses into the doors, and it was as if there was a separate world behind each door. I told myself, "I don't want to go through any of those doors, thank you." And at that point, the electric current stopped. What I learned from that experience was that at death, options will appear to you, based on your past kamma. You have to be careful about which options you go for.

Years later, I was reminded of this incident by a movie I saw. I was flying non-stop from Bangkok back to Los Angeles, and there was a child sitting in the seat in front of me. He had all the *Ice Age* movies, so I got to see all the *Ice Age* movies. One of the best scenes was in the second one. The characters are adrift in a dark, foggy night. All of a sudden, lights appear, so they go toward the lights. And there in the lights are these very beautiful mermaids and mermen. They look very attractive, and all the characters get very dreamy-eyed looking at them. But then you look a little more carefully at those mermaids and mermen, and you see that there are bursts of static. And in the bursts of static, there are fangs. Piranha fish.

So be very careful when alternatives appear to you as you die. Don't fall for the mermaids and mermen. They might have fangs. Just make up your mind that you want to go to a place where you can practice the Dhamma.

The question came up in the course of the retreat: "Does this mean the human world?" It could be the human world or it could be a deva world, because there are devas who can practice. One evening, in fact, Ajaan Suwat came up to the meditation hall at the monastery. A group of visitors from Bangkok were sitting around talking. And out of nowhere, he said to them, "Don't aspire to come back to the human world, because in the near future, the human world won't be a good place to be." Now, when an ajaan says something like that out of nowhere, people listen. Ideally, as you're dying, you want to delight in seclusion, delight in the unafflicted, delight in non-

objectification, as we said the other night. At the very least, delight in the Dhamma, in abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones.

Remember that these things are possible, and that if you're mindful and alert at death, you can actually engage in abandoning and developing up through and beyond the moment of death. You need to keep these possibilities in mind because suffering comes from having a limited sense of your possibilities. Suffering is clinging, clinging is an addiction, and a lesson I learned in dealing with people who suffer from addiction is that they suffer from a lack of imagination. You don't see the end of suffering as possible or if it is, you can't imagine yourself doing it.

Now, to correct these attitudes requires training your self as commentator. You have to train the commentator in two habits.

The first is that you want the commentator to be basically positive: helpful and encouraging along the path. Remember the Buddha's teaching style. He would urge, rouse, and encourage his listeners. And basically, he would urge, rouse, and encourage his listeners to delight in abandoning unskillful attitudes and to delight in developing skillful ones.

To give you some examples from the Canon:

In terms of urging, when the Buddha would tell his listeners how to talk to themselves, he would follow a pattern. He would say, "Train yourself this way," and then tell you how to talk to yourself to train yourself—as when he urged his son, Rāhula, to train himself, "I won't tell a deliberate lie, even for a laugh."

As for rousing, the Buddha would encourage his listeners to be like soldiers, like well-trained horses and elephants, or like skilled craftsmen.

In terms of encouraging, remember his very first Dhamma talk: Before he delivered the talk, he told his listeners, the five brethren, "Look, I've found the deathless. When I teach you, you'll be able to find it, too." That gave them the incentive to listen attentively to the talk with the attitude that they could identify in their minds what he was talking about and put into practice what he was telling them to do.

With regard to the forest tradition, you have to remember that the ajaans came from families on the very low rungs of the social order in Thailand. So,

many of the Dhamma talks you hear from the ajaans say, "Look, you're a human being, you've got what it takes." This is not only for the monks, but also for lay women and lay men. All you need is a human body and a human mind, and that's what you've got. It's because of this encouragement that we have the forest tradition now.

So that's the first approach in training your commentator: You're training it to be positive.

The second is to train it to be compassionate. This requires discernment, either in its role of a determination or as one of the bases for success. This means, on the one hand, taking the long view, realizing that you have to understand your occasional lapses. There will be times when you don't do your absolute best, and your commentator has to understand that.

But the commentator should also hold you to a high standard. Think of the best teachers you had in school, the ones that got the best work out of you by holding you to a high standard. They're the ones who taught you the most, and they're the ones from whom you most benefited even though you may not have liked them at the time. So take joy in what you can do well and keep on training. Here again, you want to delight in abandoning and in developing. In terms of the Buddha's instructions to Rāhula, you should develop a healthy sense of shame when you slip on the path, and a healthy sense of pride as you make progress in your practice.

The Buddha said that the secret to his awakening was discontent with his skillful qualities. In other words, as long as he hadn't reached the end of suffering, he wouldn't stop. This may seem to conflict with the idea that you should take pride and joy in the good you've done, but actually, the Buddha said you should also take pride in your desire to learn more. This is what it means to delight in the Dhamma, in developing, and in abandoning in the most productive way. You take joy in your progress, but you're not satisfied until you reach the goal.

When your self as commentator has been trained in these ways, it's fit to be in charge of skillfully following the Buddha's five-step program for running a cost-benefit analysis on your desires, especially in comparing the allure with the drawbacks. These reflections change the balance of power between the

allure and the drawbacks because you have an expanded sense of the possibilities for good or ill that you can do. For the good, you realize that it is possible to put an end to suffering. For ill, you realize that continuing on in saṁsāra could be a long, painful slog. Your determination on discernment induces you to view things in the long term and to look for the best possible happiness.

So what do you want this commentator to do? First, you want it to be sensitive to the origination of what's coming up in the mind so that you can recognize which mind states you can trust and which ones you can't. Also you want this commentator to be sensitive to the passing away. This teaches you two lessons. On the one hand, you realize that your defilements aren't as monolithic as they seem. On the other, you realize that when good things arise and pass away, you should be heedful, that you should act on your skillful intentions while they're present because they might not always be there.

As for the allure, you want to be very sensitive to the long-term consequences of going for the most skillful alternative, learning how to take joy even in small acts of goodness. As the Buddha said, "Don't be afraid of acts of goodness. That's another word for happiness." And you want your commentator to appreciate the joy of concentration.

At the same time, you want to keep in mind the perspective that comes from believing in the mind's ability to survive the death of the body. And particularly you want to see the futility of going just for sensual pleasures. You don't miss out on anything of real value if you don't get them. As the Buddha once said, if you see a person endowed with all the possible sensual pleasures, remind yourself that you've been there, so there's no need to be jealous or envious. And as Ajaan Fuang once said, if you strongly desire particular sensual pleasures, it's a sign that you had them in a past life, and you really miss them this time around. He added that if you think about that for a few minutes, you'll realize if you get them again, you're going to lose them again. So why get involved?

As for teaching your commentator to look for drawbacks, try to measure the anticipated outcome of a particular desire against the pleasures of concentration and a stable mind, and also in terms of the third noble truth:

that there is a cessation of suffering and that it's the highest happiness. In particular, see the drawbacks of going for pleasures that would require acting against the precepts.

As for being sensitive to the escape, learn to see calm as a good thing, and be ready to put aside your childish obsessions. Remember that the pleasure of dispassion is a happiness based not on fictions, but on realities. In other words, you don't have to tell yourself stories about your pleasures, especially about the joy of nibbāna, because it requires no delight at all.

When you've trained the three types of self—as agent, consumer, and commentator—in line with these skillful desires of the noble eightfold path, the four bases for success, the four determinations, and the six objects of delight, they become a help on the way to awakening. And when you've done that work, you can let them go—not with a sense of neurotic self-hatred, but with a sense of appreciation.

You probably know the image of the raft. You're on this side of the river, which is dangerous. You want to get to the other side where there's safety. There's no nibbāna yacht to come over to pick you up, so you have to fashion a raft. And how do you fashion the raft? You take the twigs and branches on this side of the river and bind them into a raft. Then, relying on the raft, kicking with your feet, and swimming with your hands, you get across the river. In other words, you hold on to the path and you make an effort. When you get to the other side, you can let the raft go. Then, as the Buddha said, you don't carry it on your head or on your back. You let it go. But he added that you let it go with a sense of appreciation. You're not just throwing it away. You think, "How useful this raft has been to me!" Yet now it's time to let it go.

The same point holds with your sense of self on the path. It's made out of the aggregates on this side of the river that we talked about this morning: the five aggregates and the three types of fabrication. Then you use it to get across. When you see that you don't need those fabrications anymore, you can let them go, but with a sense of appreciation.

One of the problems we've found with a lot of people who come to Buddhism is that they hear that the Buddha teaches that there is no self, so they should get rid of their sense of self. Some of them, being Westerners,

already hate themselves, so they take that as justification for just throwing themselves away. But that's not how the Buddha taught. You train yourself—your selves—to be more skillful. When the time comes to let all sense of self go, you do it with a sense of appreciation. There's no sense of hatred anymore. You see that it has been helpful, but it has its limitations.

So these are some of the ways in which your expanded perspective offered by the Buddha's teaching can change the balance of power in your mind, especially as it engages in its cost-benefit analysis to sort out which desires are worth following and which ones are not. With this expanded perspective, you're more likely to want to follow the desires that are in line with the path.

This evening's discussion has been focused on this issue in general terms. Tomorrow night I'd like to explore this issue further, focusing on a specific case: the desires you need to cultivate in order to practice the brahma-vihāras, sublime attitudes of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity.

As the retreat comes to an end, we'd like to tell you, "Don't think about the end of the retreat, don't focus on what's going to happen after," but you can't help it. So we're going to talk about attitudes that you have to take out into the world. It's a crazy world, but these attitudes will help you survive. And not only survive, but also to flourish inside.

April 29, 2025, Morning

Acceptance & Contentment

There's so much said about how Buddhism teaches acceptance that it comes as a surprise when you look at the Pāli Canon and see that, aside from accepting invitations, there are only four things the Buddha has you accept. And there are two main things he says not to accept which, even though they're just two, cover a much larger territory.

He has you accept the fact that:

- one, there will be pain in life;
- two, there will be people who say harmful and hurtful things;
- three, when you've made a mistake in the past, you should accept the fact that it was a mistake; and
- four, when someone has died, you have to accept the fact that they're dead.

In each of those cases, the Buddha doesn't simply have you put up with the suffering that comes from accepting these things. He actually gives you tools so that you don't have to suffer from them.

- As we mentioned in the talk on pain, the Buddha recommends that you develop feelings of pleasure through concentration, that you become sensitive to how feelings have an effect on the mind through the way you perceive feelings of pain, and that you can calm that effect by changing the perceptions. We've already discussed this in detail, so I'll just mention it now.

- That brings us to the next topic, which is painful and hurtful words. The Buddha has you reflect that there are many kinds of speech in the human world: true and false, useful and useless, words said with a mind of goodwill and those said with inner hate. This is the nature of human speech. So when you're a victim of false, ill-intentioned, and useless speech, you have to remind

yourself that this is normal. It's nothing out of the ordinary. If you want to hear speech that's only true and useful and said with good intentions, you're in the wrong world.

In other words, he has you depersonalize the speech. You may feel that you're the victim of this kind of speech, but then you have to realize it's everywhere. That helps to lessen the sense of being singled out for something extraordinarily bad.

And you should still have goodwill for the people saying those things, no matter what they say. To help you do this, he recommends that you keep certain perceptions in mind, perceptions meant to remind you that your goodwill can be much bigger than whatever harm those people can do.

One perception is that your goodwill is like the earth. A man comes along with a shovel and a hoe, and he wants the earth to be without earth. So he digs here, digs there; spits here, spits there; pees here, pees there, saying, "Be without earth, be without earth." But the earth will never be without earth because of those puny efforts. In other words, have a sense that your goodwill is really large, much larger than anything other people can do to you.

Another image is of the river Ganges, which is wide and large. Someone comes along with a torch and tries to burn up the river. As long as the river's not polluted, it's not going to be set on fire. So have a sense that your goodwill is vast and wet. Nothing can set it on fire.

Another good image is that your goodwill is like space. People can try to write words on space, but the words don't stick, because there's no surface for them to stick to. Try to see that the words other people say don't stick in your mind.

So try to develop these perceptions about your goodwill: that your goodwill is this large, this non-flammable, offering no surface to which anything can stick. That makes it a lot easier to put up with the efforts of other people to hurt you with their speech.

Remind yourself also of the Buddha's image of the bandits trying to cut you into pieces with a saw—that even in a case like that, he would have you cultivate goodwill for them. As he says, "If you keep this image in mind, are there any words that you couldn't endure?"

There's another image that Ven. Sāriputta gives to help de-personalize unskillful speech: When someone says something nasty to you, just tell yourself, "Okay, an unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear. When the contact stops, the sound stops." And you leave it there. Now, our problem is we don't leave it there. We pull it in and then we stab ourselves with it. So the question is, "Whose fault is that?" The sound stopped a while back, but *you're* the one who's still stabbing yourself with it. The trick is just to let those sounds stop at the ear and die away. Then tell yourself, "I've learned something about that person." It may not be what you wanted to learn, but the important thing is that you don't hurt yourself with those words.

So those are some of the techniques the Buddha has you use to deal with unpleasant words. Even though you have to accept the fact that you're exposed to such words, as he says, you don't have to suffer from them. Now, *acceptance* here doesn't mean that you don't respond, simply that you don't respond out of the sense of anger that comes from hurting yourself with those words. The less you hurt yourself with other people's unskillful speech, the more likely you'll be to think of a skillful response.

• As for mistakes you made in the past, the Buddha says that you admit the mistakes and make a determination not to repeat those mistakes. That's the best a human being can do. Then you spread thoughts of goodwill: goodwill for yourself so that you don't keep on beating yourself up with those memories; goodwill for the person you harmed; and goodwill for all beings. Remind yourself that you don't want to harm anybody.

• The final thing the Buddha has you accept is the fact that someone has died. There's a story in the commentary of a queen who has died but the king refuses to accept that she's dead. So he keeps the body in the palace. Of course, this upsets the people in the palace, so they want to try to find some way of getting him to accept the fact that she's dead. They go see a monk who's psychic and ask him, "Can you find where she's gone?" It turns out she'd been reborn as a worm. So they find the worm, and the monk takes the worm into the palace. He uses his psychic powers to have a conversation with the worm in front of the king. He asks the worm, "Do you miss your husband, the king?" The worm says, "Oh, no, not at all! I have a really nice husband worm now who treats me much better." The king hears this: "Get rid of the

body." That's a story in the commentary, it's not in the Canon, so I can't guarantee it's true.

But the Canon does report that the Buddha advises you to admit your grief over the person who's died and to express your grief in ways that you think will actually be useful. You arrange eulogies, giving yourself and your friends a chance, to talk about how much you miss the person's goodness. You have Dhamma talks, you give gifts, you dedicate the merit to the person who's died.

But when you realize that your grief is becoming self-indulgent, then you remind yourself that you do have work to do in this world. Here the Buddha also has you remember the fact that anybody who is born, has to die. If you think about all the people who have died today, every day, that takes some of the weight off your own grief. All too often, when we're feeling grief, it's as if the whole universe is focusing its weight on us. But you realize, no, this sorrow is spread around. That should give rise to a feeling of compassion for all those who are suffering from loss right now. So you turn the grief into compassion, which is a much more skillful emotion.

Those are the four things the Buddha has you accept. And as you see, acceptance doesn't mean just sitting there and putting up with these things. It also means having the tools so that you don't have to suffer from them.

• But there are things the Buddha has you *not* accept, and these cover a much larger range than the things he recommends accepting: You don't accept the arising of *any* unskillful thoughts in the mind: thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, thoughts of harmfulness—in other words, anything that would come under wrong resolve—and then he adds, "any unskillful quality at all." You try to get rid of these things as quickly as you can. This may involve watching them for a while so as to understand them. In other words, you do the five-step analysis that we've been discussing this week: see where these thoughts come from, see how they pass away, try to understand the allure, and remind yourself of their drawbacks, until you finally develop a sense of dispassion for them so you can let them go and escape from them.

So you can see that the Buddha is very selective as to what he has you accept and what he does not have you accept. It's very similar to his teachings on contentment. He has you be content with whatever food, clothing, or shelter

you have, as long as it's good enough to practice, but *not* to be content with any unskillful qualities that arise in the mind. In fact, he says not even to be content with the *skillful* qualities you have, as long as they haven't taken you all the way to the end of suffering.

So you can see that the Buddha's teachings on acceptance and contentment are nuanced. As is the case with so many representations in Buddhism—that Buddhism is all about acceptance or all about letting go—the Buddha actually was selective in these areas. We have a tendency in the modern world to have buzzwords for things. And Buddhism, too, often gets buzz cut to a slogan or two. Which is why it's good to know his actual teachings, so that you can realize that they're much more subtle and nuanced than that—and they're also much more useful because they *are* more nuanced.

April 29, 2025, Afternoon

Q & A

Q: I've heard it said that there's a danger in practicing the jhānas, in that you would stay stuck there and you wouldn't be able to gain awakening. Could you tell us more?

A: Of the different factors of the path, the two that the Buddha placed most emphasis on were right view and right concentration. Of course, right concentration is the four jhānas. This means that you need jhāna to gain awakening. So it's the opposite of an obstacle. And although the Buddha points out that it is possible to get stuck on *any* level or stage of the practice—such as virtue or psychic knowledge—the problem is not with that particular part of the practice. The problem is that you just get satisfied with being there.

There is one passage in the Canon where the Buddha says it's possible to be stuck on jhāna. The image he gives is of holding onto a branch, and the sap from the branch gets onto your hand. Then your hand gets stuck to the branch. But the stickiness of the sap doesn't represent jhāna. It represents the fact that you're simply satisfied with where you are. If you realize there's more to be done, then there's no problem.

Remember, it's also possible to get attached to the insights that come with meditation, and sometimes that attachment can lead to very strong delusion. So it's not the case that jhāna practice is dangerous and insight practice is not. With the practice of jhāna, you do have to get attached to it for a while so that you can get good at it. But if you're observant, you begin to realize that there's more to be done, there are better things to attain, and then the jhāna is not a problem.

Q: Dear Ajaan, I didn't know that there were two kinds of non-conditioned consciousness. What are their characteristics and how to recognize them? Thank you so much. I thought that I was progressing, but it seems that I'm at a dead end.

A: There are not two types of unconditioned consciousness. There is one type of consciousness which genuinely is unconditioned, and there's one that *appears* to be unconditioned. The one that appears to be unconditioned is your basic sense of awareness, which is aware of the six senses. It appears to be non-conditioned because when it's trained in concentration, it doesn't seem to be affected by anything in the six senses, and the level of fabrication that goes into maintaining it is very, very subtle—so subtle that you get the impression that it's unconditioned.

The genuine unconditioned consciousness comes when there's no intention in the present moment at all, and all connections with the six senses are stopped. There's no time, no space, and there are no objects in that consciousness.

The peaceful conditioned consciousness is what the ajaans in Thailand refer to either as the "knower" or as "awareness itself": *phoo roo*, in Thai. It's a useful level of consciousness to be aware of as you're practicing concentration. It helps to pull you away from your attachment to the objects of your concentration. It also helps when you're experiencing pain, as you get a sense of the awareness and the pain itself are two separate things. In cases like that, it's a useful skill to develop on the path. But it is a skill. It's something you do, it's something you maintain through the perception of awareness, so it's not unconditioned. Compared to the Grand Canyon, it's the ditch on the side of the road to the Grand Canyon.

Q: Can you get into jhāna while you're walking?

A: It is possible to be in the first jhāna while you're walking. It's not easy, but it is possible. As you get more and more skilled at the jhānas, you find you can do more and more activities while you're in this state of first jhāna. But as soon as you engage in the verbal fabrication needed to speak, you leave the jhānas.

Q: Dear Ajaan, could you comment a bit on harmonizing/connecting the energies in different parts of the body? For instance, when they flow in different directions, each independently pleasant, how best to connect them? If we settle on one spot after this process, should we keep in mind the

different patterns of movement during the spreading phase? Or focus on the energy coming from that spot?

A: This is one of those areas where you can experiment on your own. You'll find that sometimes you want to focus more on the energy that comes from the spot where you're focused, and other times you want to say, "Let the body breathe freely as it wants to, whatever direction the energies may go." Then see which one of those is more pleasant, more conducive to concentration during that particular session of meditation.

Q: During last night's meditation, while I was spreading the pleasant breath sensations throughout the body and while there were pains in certain parts of the body, suddenly my perception of the body faded away, the pains disappeared, and a sensation—rather pleasant, but a little foggy—was enveloping me. I was always conscious of the breath, but I wasn't feeling any breathing sensations in the body. I couldn't really locate the breath, so I got scared, and I was afraid that it was a wrong type of concentration, so I tried to get out. Was I right to get out?

A: Yes, you were right to get out. When you're not confident in a particular state of concentration, go back to step one and resume the practice of exploring the breath energies in the body, being very clear about where the different parts of your body are.

Q: I have read that mettā or contemplation of death could be used as a basis for jhāna. How does that work? For instance, how is pīti caused by contemplation of corpses?

A: Sometimes, as you contemplate death, the fact that this body is going to die becomes very, very prominent, and your sense of attachment to the body, especially attachment to the appearance of the body, fades away. When that fades away, a sense of rapture can arise. As you realize that your sensual desires are really a burden on the mind and you put them down for a while, rapture and pleasure can come from that.

Q: We've talked a lot about the breath, so I have two questions. One is, do you make a distinction between the in-and-out breath and then the breath from a more conceptual point of view? Two, what about sensations outside of

those that are directly related to the breath? For example, when I was taught how to meditate, my teacher said to meditate on the sensation that I was feeling when my two thumbs touch one another. Every time that I would lose track, to come back to that sensation. What could you say on this topic?

A: Conceptually, the Buddha talks about what he calls the wind element in the body, and one of the aspects of that element is the in-and out-breath. Other aspects of that element would be the movement of energy running along the limbs of the body. Ajaan Lee connects the two and says you can use both together as part of breath meditation.

As for having your thumbs touch, that's one way of making sure you're giving yourself a sensation to come back to when the mind wanders. But it's a sign that you're trying to do one-pointed meditation. When you're doing one-pointed meditation, it's very easy to wander away. When you develop a full-body awareness, you don't need that touch of the thumbs.

Q: Ajaan Lee advises to have a theme when you meditate. Could you elaborate on that? If I wanted, for example, to meditate on anger, how would I go about it?

A: What he means is that you have to have a very clear object for your meditation. If you want to meditate on anger, try to be aware of the times in the day when anger arises. But you still try to stay with the breath as you go through the day. Simply pose that question in mind, "When anger arises, I want to be aware of it." Then remind yourself of the five steps that the Buddha taught. What sparked the anger? How does it pass away? What's the allure? What are its drawbacks? And how can you develop dispassion for it?

Q: Than Ajaan, you and Ajaan Lee have spoken about the back of the neck as an important area for those with heart problems. Do you have suggestions for the kidneys as well, specifically the left one? My right one has stopped working.

A: Ajaan Fuang used to have kidney disease, and one of his ways of dealing with the pain was to think of the energy in his back going down the spine through the tailbone, and then out of the tailbone, down into the ground. Think of it extending roots down into the ground. See if that helps.

I had some kidney problems for a while after I had malaria. I found that focusing on the tension of my knees and relaxing that tension helped a lot.

Q: What is the difference between perception and fabrication?

A: The word *fabrication* has many levels of meaning. It can cover all intentional activities, in which case, perception would be one kind of intentional activity, as are all the aggregates. When we speak in terms of the three fabrications, perception is one of them. In this case, it would be mental fabrication. Basically, in this case, directed thought and evaluation—verbal fabrications—would be like full sentences, perceptions would be like single words. They could also be individual images that would occur in the mind.

Q: May I ask, what is identity, truly? When one releases attachment to worldly possessions, does this also include releasing interests, hobbies, and skills, since these do not carry over into future lives? Would that also mean that the sense of personality is gradually stripped away as well? What then remains? More specifically, what remains that we can still feel, know, and observe in this life? And how can we ensure that we are observing it within ourselves now? In other words, the part of ourselves that we are developing through meditation and daily practice, which continues into future lives: How can we clearly recognize and feel the presence of that now?

A: Anyone who's had more than one child will observe that they come differently into the world—with different habits, different interests, different personalities. This is what carries over from one lifetime to the next. This is why you have some children who are especially talented in some areas. It's also why some babies are more prone to anger than others. The Buddha talks about qualities that you develop in the meditation and the practice in general as things that will pass over to the next lifetime: things like conviction, a sense of shame and compunction, a moral sense, and discernment. Of course, your bad habits will also carry over. So you want to work on your good habits as much as you can.

There's a belief in Thailand that Ajaan Lee was King Asoka reborn. When I found out about this, I got a biography of Asoka, and at the back it had his edicts translated. One of them, addressed to his government workers, said, "If

you want to work to my satisfaction, you have to know what I want before I know." I translated that into Thai and read it to Ajaan Fuang. His comment was, "2,000 years. He didn't change."

Q: Dear Ajaan, thank you for your teaching. The other day, you mentioned not to try and break from a state of becoming while it's happening, but rather to wait until it fades and then try to conjure more skillful becomings. Can you please give me an example of this?

A: I can think of two examples. One would be that if you have an unskillful emotion, instead of trying to destroy that emotion, you try to give rise to a more skillful emotion in its place. The unskillful one will gradually fade away and then disappear. In other words, you're focusing on the creation of what is skillful more than trying to destroy what is unskillful. Another example would be at the end of your life you have a bad health illness. Some people would like to go to Belgium or Switzerland to have an assisted suicide. But there's a lot of regret that comes with suicide. I know of a psychic who deals with spirits of people who have died, and she told me once what she has to deal often with people who have committed suicide. Excuse the language, she says that they all go through an "oh, shit" moment of shock and regret, when they realize what they have thrown away. So it's better to stay in this lifetime and do whatever you can that would create good kamma for the next lifetime. If you're a meditator, work on your relationship with pain. That way, you can make good use of what's remaining of this lifetime.

Q: How to tell the difference between *saṁvega* and *vibhava-taṇhā?*

A: Vibhava-taṇhā, or the desire for non-becoming, is focused on a particular state of becoming that you have already attained and you want to have that state destroyed. Saṁvega is more global. It's a sense of terror when you think about all the future possibilities for suffering that could happen in the course of saṁsāra, along with the dismaying sense that you can't blame anyone else for how you've trapped yourself in saṁsāra. Along with that comes a strong sense of, "I've got to do something to get out of the entire system."

Q: Would you explain more specifically this notion of heedfulness? Specifically with regards to human relationships, personal relationships. Does that mean that we need to sort out who we can associate with, who we should be friends or have a romantic involvement with?

A: You do that already anyhow, right? You have to be selective in who you associate with. Heedfulness simply means that you make your selection based on the long-term consequences of pursuing a particular relationship. If you find that you're in a relationship that's making you do unskillful things, it'd be good to pull out of that relationship. This doesn't mean you can't be friends with unskillful people, but that friendship with them has to have boundaries so that they don't pull you into their unskillful habits and attitudes.

Q: Yesterday you talked about the desire for becoming and for non-becoming, and about difficulties related to marriage and divorce. If a marriage is broken or has ended for a number of years, but is maintained legally to preserve familial unity, to keep the family together with both sides being very respectful of the other and choosing to live a chaste life without engaging in a divorce procedure, would that be considered a skillful way of dealing with the situation? On the contrary, if the divorce is chosen to prevent future complications, would that be seen as an act, as an example of acting on a desire for non-becoming, and therefore, would that be an unskillful course of action?

A: The divorce would not necessarily be unskillful. When the Buddha's talking about not going for becoming or not going for non-becoming, this basically means there's going to be suffering either way, but it's not necessarily unskillful. There's no quick or easy answer to this question. But bear in mind that divorce is not necessarily unskillful.

Q: I'm not sure I understood your answer to the question about these big catastrophes that take many victims. Is it their bad luck that they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and that would be what causes these little seeds of bad kamma to sprout?

A: The Buddha says if you ask questions like this, you're going to go crazy. Generally, though, he says if you have no bad kamma, it's like having a hand

with no wounds. You can pick up poison and it doesn't kill you. But if you have bad kamma, it's like a wound in your hand. If you pick up poison, it'll kill you. To be a human being means you have some wounds in your hands. But the nature of the wounds will be different, and the times when they appear and disappear will be different as well. It just happens that sometimes the sprouting time and the opportunities come together, and that's when some bad kamma can be manifested like this. It can happen to a lot of people at the same time. But remember: Don't look down on people whose bad kamma is appearing, because you don't know what seeds of bad kamma you might potentially have in your own field.

Q: What would the Buddhist approach be to trying to overcome mild OCD?

A: OCD is basically attachment to habits and practices, which is one of the four types of suffering. The typical way of dealing with that attachment is, one, observe yourself. See: What is it that sparks this? Then see if you can disassociate that trigger with the behavior, replacing it with better things to be OCD about. For example, be a little OCD about the breath.

Q: The citta, when it's no longer under karmic influences and when it has reached the highest degree of purification, does it settle with the characteristic of upekkhā, or equanimity, and would that be a state that is exclusive to the arahant?

A: Those who have gained full awakening no longer create any unskillful kamma, but they are still subject to the influences of their past kamma. This is why awakened people can still have diseases, meet with accidents, etc. Their state of mind has no particular feeling at all. Upekkhā is their attitude toward the world because they're no longer feeding on the world, but it doesn't define their state of mind. Their mind is in touch with unbinding, which is the ultimate happiness, but they're not attached to the happiness. It's not a feeling, but it's just there.

Q: Does the Buddha say that awakening is in each of us or what is his vision?

A: Awakening is something you do. We have the potential do it, to awaken, but the awakening is not already there. As to whether we will develop that

potential to its fullest point, the Buddha refused to say, because each of us has the choice to follow the path that realizes that potential or not.

As for the unconditioned consciousness of awakening, it's outside of time. You can't really say that it's already there or not already there, because it's outside of time. As for your nature, you hear a lot about Buddha nature, and you'd think the person most qualified to talk about Buddha nature would be the Buddha, but he never mentions it.

April 29, 2025, Evening

Determined on the Sublime Attitudes

This evening there was a large spider in my room. I've seen bigger. I've told you the story of Ajaan Fuang with the snake. This spider has been there for two days. So I let it stay. This evening, though, I figured, okay, that's enough. So with a lot of goodwill, I caught the spider and released it out into the trees. I don't love that spider, but I wished it well. I mention this just to make the point that mettā, or goodwill, doesn't necessarily mean loving-kindness.

Tonight I'd like to discuss the ways in which you can use the topics we've been discussing—in particular, the three fabrications and the four determinations—in the practice of developing the sublime attitudes, or brahma-vihāras. Because this is a meditative practice, you can meditate while we talk.

The brahma-vihāras are the practice of developing unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, and unlimited equanimity. Goodwill means wishing for happiness. Compassion is what goodwill feels when you see beings who are suffering, hoping that they will be released from their suffering. Empathetic joy is what goodwill feels when you see people who are already happy: You want them to continue in their happiness. Equanimity means being unshaken emotionally when you realize that there are a lot of people who are doing things that are unskillful that you cannot change and you can't let yourself get upset by that.

Sometimes we're given the impression that desire and determination don't play much of a role in developing these attitudes. In particular, we're told that unlimited goodwill comes naturally to the mind, that all you have to do is let the mind reveal its innate nature and it'll feel goodwill for all.

That, however, is not how the Buddha explained the issue. As he said in the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta, the attitude of universal goodwill is something you have

to make an effort to keep in mind. It's a form of mindfulness that you have to be determined on. This means that universal goodwill and the other attitudes are not innate. They're called brahma-vihāras for a good reason. Brahmās are high levels of devas who have developed these attitudes and who dwell in them. We human beings don't dwell innately in these unlimited attitudes. Our goodwill, compassion, etc., tend to be partial: We easily feel them for some beings, but not for others. To say nothing of human beings, even lower levels of devas don't have these universal attitudes.

There's a story in the Canon of a leper who sees the Buddha giving a talk. First he thinks, "Oh, there must be a food distribution here. Let me go and see if I can get some food." As he goes closer, he realizes there's no food, but that the Dhamma is being taught. So he sits down and listens to the Dhamma. The Buddha focuses on him. As the leper listens to the talk and reflects on the Dhamma, he becomes a stream-enterer, which is the first level of awakening. He dies soon after and becomes a deva. And now he's a deva who outshines all the other devas on that level. But instead of being happy about this, the other devas resent it. "How did they let these lepers into our place?" So even devas don't have universal goodwill, to say nothing of human beings.

Human goodwill tends to be partial. You wish for the happiness of those who are good to you and to people you love, but it's easy to feel ill will toward those who have harmed you or those whom you care about. We don't need the Buddha to point this out to us. We can see this clearly in other people's behavior and in our own hearts and minds. This is why unlimited goodwill is something you have to be determined on developing.

Two levels of desire are involved here. Goodwill in and of itself is a desire for happiness. And for it to become unlimited, you have to desire to develop that unlimited mind state within your own mind. Both of these desires, to become well-established, involve all four aspects of a skillful determination: discernment, truth, relinquishment, and calm.

• Discernment plays a major role in all of the brahma-vihāras: figuring out what they mean, figuring out why they would be conducive to your long-term welfare and happiness, knowing how to foster them, and knowing which brahma-vihāra is appropriate for each occasion.

Here it's worthwhile to stop and think about the question the Buddha says lies at the beginning of discernment: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" This shows that goodwill is inherent in true discernment. You want your happiness to be long-term, and you realize that if it depends on afflicting others, it won't last. So you wish for their happiness as well.

The brahma-vihāras fall into two sorts. Those that express a wish—this would include goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy—and then the one, equanimity, that accepts the fact that your desires can't always be fulfilled as you would like and that you have to learn how not to suffer from that fact. You may have noticed, if you've looked in the chanting book, that the translations of the first three brahma-vihāras are expressed as wishes—"May...may... may"—whereas the last one is simply a statement of fact: "All beings are the owners of their actions." That's the correct translation.

A couple of years ago we found that there was an incorrect translation in an earlier edition of the book here, saying, "May all beings inherit the results of their actions." It sounds like a curse. So now it's been corrected as simply a statement of fact.

Discernment has to understand that all the brahma-vihāras will train both the heart and the mind. The mind is needed to figure them out. The heart involves an act of will. You have to figure out what each of the brahma-vihāras means, how to foster it, and how to get the heart to want it.

Let's start with mettā. Mettā means goodwill—not love or loving-kindness—because from the Buddha's point of view, love is partial and unreliable. If you love someone, and someone else is good to that person, you'll love that second person, too. If a person mistreats someone you love, you'll hate that person. If there's somebody you hate, and somebody else mistreats that person, you'll love that second person. And if someone treats that person well, you'll hate that person. That's why love is not a universal attitude. It contains a lot of clinging and partiality, and can carry hatred in its wake.

Basically mettā is a wish that other beings be happy and that you be happy, too. It doesn't necessarily mean that you have to have any relationship with those beings. I've told you the story of the Ajaan Fuang and the snake. There's

also a story in the Canon. A monk is sitting under a tree meditating. A snake falls out of the tree, lands on him, bites him, and kills him. The monks go to the Buddha to deliver this news. The Buddha said that the monk had died because he hadn't spread goodwill to all the families of snakes. Apparently there are four main families of snakes. At any rate, the Buddha then teaches the monks a chant for spreading goodwill to the snakes. It starts with the four families of snakes and then goes to all beings, including all the creepy, crawly things you can think of. Then it says, "May they be happy. May they meet with good fortune. And may they go away."

That's not necessarily love. It's simply goodwill.

Now, sometimes you hear mettā is defined as acceptance, saying, "I accept you," but that's a pretty low bar. If someone were to say to me, "I accept you," I might respond, "Why should I care? I'd prefer that you want me to be happy."

Mettā is actually a matter of respect, and it involves two kinds of respect. First is respect for the desire for happiness. That desire is what defines people, so when you're wishing that people be truly happy, you're sympathizing with the best versions of what they are and what they can be.

The second object of respect is respect for the principle of kamma, realizing that lasting happiness has to come from skillful actions. It can't come just from good wishes. This is why we say, when spreading thoughts of mettā, "May you understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them."

The teaching on kamma actually plays a role in three issues related to goodwill.

– First is understanding how universal goodwill would lead to your long-term welfare and happiness.

– Second is understanding the role of desire in fabricating goodwill.

– Third is understanding how to skillfully go about expressing the wish for happiness.

1) First point: Universal goodwill leads to your long-term welfare and happiness both in relation to how it would induce you to create good kamma

now and in the future, and also in relation to the kamma you've done in the past.

In terms of present and future kamma, if you have ill will for anybody, you're going to harm them easily. That's going to become your bad kamma. So to protect yourself from yourself, you try to have goodwill for all.

As for your past kamma, the Buddha says that when that ripens, the effect it'll have on your mind depends on your mind state right now. If your mind is narrow and restricted, the effect of that past bad kamma will be very strong. If your mind is more expansive—as when you develop universal goodwill and the other brahma-vihāras—then the effect of that past kamma will be weakened.

The image he gives is of a large lump of salt. If you put the lump of salt into a small cup of water, you can't drink the water because it's too salty. But if you put it into a large river of clean water, then you can still drink the water of the river because the salt has been diluted into so much water.

So that's why the practice of universal goodwill can lead to your long-term welfare and happiness: It protects you from bad kamma—past, present, and future.

2) As for the role of desire in fabricating goodwill, that's a kind of kamma in itself. You do this because you need it. If you feel ill will for anyone, you're bound to behave unskillfully toward that person and that will then become your own bad kamma and lead to your own unhappiness. So you talk to yourself about this, and you give mental images to emphasize this point so that you'll want to develop universal goodwill. You want a happiness that harms no one. If it harms you, it's going to lead to aimlessness and depression. If it harms others, they'll try to destroy that happiness. So you have to remind yourself that you're offering protection for yourself and for others.

This, of course, involves verbal fabrication, but actually, all three kinds of fabrication are involved. You try to make the breath as calm and comfortable as possible, because if the way you breathe is aggravating, it's going to be hard to wish for the happiness of others. You have to talk to yourself, using directed thought and evaluation. You remember some of the lessons we talked about

this morning, about the bandits with the two-handled saw and about the nature of human speech. You can also use mental fabrications, such as perceptions—like the perception of your mettā as being large like the earth, like the river Ganges, and like space.

You can also call to mind the image of the mother loving her only child. I'd like to emphasize again what that image means. It's often mistranslated as saying that you should love all beings the same way that a mother would love her only child. Instead, it actually says you should protect your goodwill as a mother would protect her only child. In other words, you realize that your goodwill is valuable.

The Buddha explicitly calls it a form of wealth—and it's a kind of wealth that you can create all the time. It's as if you have your own treasury, your own mint. Unlike the money of the world, the more you print the wealth of goodwill, the higher its value because it gives you protection all around. And it's wealth that nobody can take from you. You lose it only if you throw it away.

So again, these are perceptions you can hold in mind.

3) As for the role of kamma in understanding happiness, realize that beings are going to be happy not because you wish for their happiness, but because they act skillfully. This is expressed in the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta. Its statement of goodwill starts out, "May all beings be happy at heart," but then it doesn't stop there. It also says, "May they behave skillfully"—or more precisely, "Let no one deceive another or despise anyone anywhere or, through anger or irritation, wish for another to suffer." So if other people behave unskillfully, you're not saying, "May you be happy whatever you're doing." You're saying, "May you see the harm that you're causing and give rise to a desire to stop."

This relates to what in Thailand is called a high level of mettā. This term describes the situation when someone is kind to you in a way that's not necessarily pleasant, but in which they hold you to a higher standard than you might desire. This is an important aspect of mettā. We don't just act in a pleasing way. Sometimes we have to say things that are unpleasant, for the good of that other person.

There's a story in the Canon. A group of sectarians called the Niganṭhas call a prince to them one day and say, "Do you want to become famous?" "Of course." "We'll tell you how to do it. We'll get you to ask a question the Buddha can't answer, and that'll make you famous. The question is this: 'Would the Buddha ever say anything unpleasant?' If he says, 'No,' we have him on record for saying that Devadatta was going to go to hell. That was displeasing to Devadatta. If the Buddha says, 'Yes, he would say things that are displeasing,' then you say, 'Well, what's the difference between you and ordinary people in the market?'"

So the prince invites the Buddha for a meal. This, by the way, is why monks have to be careful when accepting invitations. They never know what their hosts have in mind. After the Buddha has his meal, the prince asks the question. The Buddha says, "There's no categorical answer to that question." "Ah," the prince responds, "the Niganṭhas have been defeated," and he explains the set-up.

Then the Buddha explains his answer. First he asks a question of the prince. The prince has brought his baby son to sit on his lap. So the Buddha says, "If your child here got a sharp object in his mouth, what would you do?" The prince replies, "I'd hold his head in one hand and, with the finger of the other hand, I'd get the object out, even if it meant drawing blood. Why? Because I have compassion for the child." The Buddha then says that, in the same way, there are times when he would have to say things that are displeasing out of compassion.

You can see this point also in the Vinaya. It's not the case that monks sit around smiling at one another all the time. There are issues. And the Buddha has advice on how to deal with issues. Basically the principle is, if you're going to criticize somebody, one, you try to show respect. And two, you show respect by approaching the topic one-on-one first. In fact, you even ask permission, "Can I talk to you about something?"

So you show respect, but also you look into your own behavior. If you're guilty of the same fault that you're going to criticize in the other person, you have to get rid of that fault first. Otherwise, if you say, "Did you do *x*?" the other person's going to say, "So what if I do? You do, too." And that's the end

of the discussion. So an important part of criticism is in showing respect for the other person. And it is possible to give criticism out of goodwill as long as you do it right.

So that's the role of the first determination with regard to mettā, which is discernment: understanding how universal goodwill would lead to your long-term welfare and happiness, understanding the role of desire in fabricating goodwill, and understanding how to skillfully go about expressing the wish for happiness.

• The second determination is truth. Here, this basically means that once you've extended thoughts of goodwill, you actually act on them. We talked about the person coming from a mettā retreat and then getting cut off in traffic. You're going to go back to a world where everybody seems to be competing in how much they can challenge your goodwill. This is why the Buddha said training in the brahma-vihāras is training in mindfulness. You have to keep them in mind all the time. So the first order of business is to work for your own genuine happiness by following the noble eightfold path. That way, you begin to get more practical experience of what actually leads to happiness. And you're not the only one who will benefit if you do.

This point can be illustrated with another verbal and mental fabrication: the image of two acrobats. They set a bamboo pole vertically in the ground. One acrobat gets up on the top end of the pole, and then he gets his assistant to get up on his shoulders. Then the first acrobat tells the assistant, "Okay, you look after me and I'll look after you, and that way we'll be able to do our tricks and come down safely from the pole." But the assistant says, "No, that's not going to work. I have to look after myself, you look after yourself, and that way we'll come down safely." The Buddha says that in that case, the assistant is right: You can't maintain someone else's balance, but you make it easier for the person to maintain balance if you maintain *your* balance. So if you're able to maintain your mettā, that helps other people maintain theirs.

The Buddha says that the principle also works the other way around. You can look after other people by being kind to them, and that's the same thing as looking after yourself. Being kind to other people involves sympathy,

harmlessness, endurance, and goodwill. As you develop these qualities, you, too, benefit from them.

So when you know what things cause true happiness by giving rise to those causes in yourself, you become a good example to others, and you're in a position to offer reliable advice.

As for compassion and empathetic joy, as we said earlier, these are applications of mettā. Compassion is what mettā feels when you see somebody suffering. You want them to end their suffering. Empathetic joy is what mettā feels when you see people are happy. You want that happiness to continue.

The Buddha gives the example of seeing extremely rich and extremely poor people. These are perceptions you should hold in mind. When you see somebody who's very rich and powerful, you remind yourself: You've been there before. If you see those who are poor, you remind yourself: You've been there before, too. If you don't get out of saṁsāra, you could easily be there again. These perceptions help make sure that your compassion doesn't become patronizing. You've been in those miserable conditions, too.

We had a question the other day about spreading goodwill to beings in the lower realms—whether by thinking of them as being inferior, you're looking down on them. But in the Buddhist universe, as I said, you've been in these realms as well and you realize how much suffering is involved in being there. So your compassion doesn't have to be patronizing.

You may also have some relatives who are down there right now.

There was a brahman who came to see the Buddha one time. He said, "This merit that I make and dedicate to my ancestors, does it go to them?" Here you have to realize that, in India in those days, they would consider people going back seven generations—in other words, people descended from the great-grandparents of your great-grandparents—as related to you. The Buddha said, "If they're reborn as hungry ghosts, Yes, it would go to them." The brahman said, "But what if none of my relatives are hungry ghosts?" And the Buddha said, "Don't worry, everybody has relatives who are hungry ghosts." So when you spread compassion to these beings, it's not that you're looking down on them. You actually have to think of them as your relatives.

A similar principle applies to empathetic joy. The perception of the fact that you've been rich and fortunate before helps to make sure that you don't feel resentment for other people's good fortune. Empathetic joy is also a test of the sincerity of your mettā when you see the stupidity of those who abuse their good fortune. This is why goodwill is best expressed as a wish for true happiness and acting on the causes of true happiness.

That's the determination of truth as it relates to the brahma-vihāras.

• As for the determination on relinquishment, for your mettā to be sincere, you have to relinquish ill will, harmfulness, and resentment. So you have to look for the allure of these things and compare it with their drawbacks, so that you can find the escape from them.

• Finally, there's the determination on calm. You know that not all beings will act on the causes for happiness. Beings are free to choose what they do, say, and think, so they're free to act skillfully or unskillfully. Even the Buddha didn't live to see all beings be happy. Think of the case of the person who cuts you off as you're driving. As I told you the other day, the best thing to think is, "May you learn how to drive skillfully." Every day when you get out onto the road, this should be your attitude: "May all drivers drive skillfully." The question is, "Are they all going to drive skillfully?" No. So you have to be prepared for those who won't.

This is where the practice of the brahma-vihāras focuses on equanimity. Notice that the Buddha doesn't have you start out with equanimity. In all the lists where equanimity appears, it comes last—not because it's higher than the other members of the lists, but because it needs their support so that it doesn't turn into defeatism, depression or apathy.

Ajaan Fuang made a distinction between what he called "small-hearted equanimity" and "large-hearted equanimity." Small-hearted equanimity basically says, "Well, I guess I have to put up with this." It's unhappy and a little resentful. Large-hearted equanimity comes from the practice of concentration, when you create a sense of well-being inside, and you realize that your happiness doesn't have to depend on things outside being in a certain way, so you can feel equanimity without being depressed.

The Buddha recognizes many levels of equanimity. There's what he calls "equanimity of the flesh," in which you say, "I won't be reactive to whatever's happening at any of the six senses." As you begin meditation, he told his son, you have to make your mind like earth. You can use this perception to incline the mind not to be shaken by any negative things happening in your meditation.

But then as your meditation progresses, the Buddha says, your equanimity gets a different basis. It comes either from the pleasure of the first levels of jhāna or from the sense of freedom that comes when you gain an insight that lets your put down a burden.

Finally, the highest level of equanimity is the equanimity of full awakening. Note that this is not a feeling of equanimity, and it doesn't define awakening. It's an inner stability that comes from having found the happiness of the deathless. You no longer have to feed on the world, so whatever kind of food the world has to offer you, it doesn't bother you. You can face the issues of the world with equanimity.

So those are the lessons of the four determinations that are used in developing the brahma-vihāras.

And what are the lessons you learn from brahma-vihāra practice?

One is that happiness doesn't have to be a zero-sum game. A zero-sum game is one in which, if you gain, other people have to lose; or if they gain, you have to lose. But here you learn that you can find happiness in the happiness of others. In that way, both sides win. The sum of the game can go higher and higher.

You also learn that happiness comes from within. It's your ability to develop the brahma-vihāras, through the three kinds of fabrication, that allows you to bring a skillful attitude into any situation. And it's that attitude that will constitute your happiness. As I said, it's a wealth that comes from within, and you can make sure that it's independent of whatever happens outside.

Sometimes we're told that a sense of an independent self is a bad thing. But actually it can be very useful. If you have a sense that your goodness doesn't

have to depend on the goodness of others, then you can trust your goodness no matter what happens in the world.

So those are some of the positive lessons you learn from the brahma-vihāras.

But also we run into some of the limitations of even these kindest and most sociable of desires. A sociable desire is one that basically says, "I want other people to be happy." But you learn some sobering lessons, for example, from empathetic joy: Look at people who are happy. Many of them abuse their good fortune, their power, their wealth, their good looks. In mettā practice you say, "May all beings be happy," but this is what happiness looks like when it makes people heedless. You've probably behaved heedlessly in that way in the past, too, when you were happy. That's why you're still here. So it's up to you to develop a sense of saṁvega, a motivation to practice for more total freedom.

The lesson you learn from equanimity is that as long as happiness is dependent on conditions, it won't last. Freedom of choice means that beings are free to choose, out of ignorance, to suffer. This is why the Buddha, when asked if all the world would reach awakening, wouldn't answer. It depends on the choices of beings outside of even his control. This is why the brahma-vihāra practice on its own is not a complete practice. It can't take you totally beyond suffering.

So in this world where no one is in charge, it's wise to listen to the Buddha when he says that there are two things not to accept: any unskillful qualities in your mind and the level of your skill as long as it hasn't reached the end of suffering. This means you have to encourage yourself on the path, taking joy in what you have managed to accomplish and maintain the desire to accomplish even higher things. That's the only way out to total freedom.

In the meantime, mettā is a form of wealth that's really yours. It leads you to create good kamma, and that's the only thing you can take with you when you go. And in taking it, it's not as if you're taking anything away from the world. You're leaving behind good things as well, all the goodness you've done under the influence of goodwill.

This is one of the paradoxes of human life. If you leave good things behind, you have good things to follow you as you go. If you try to grab hold of things, they get torn from your grasp.

April 30, 2025, Morning

Conclusions

We chose to do a retreat on the topic of desire because there's so much misunderstanding around this topic in Buddhist circles. Some people will tell you that the only way to gain awakening is not to want it. In fact, if you don't want it strong enough, it'll come. You might call that the power of negative thinking.

Actually, desire plays an important role on the path. As you remember, we do want to attain a state that has no desire at the end, but we can't attain it by simply telling ourselves not to have any desires. Instead, we learn how to use skillful desires until we reach an attainment that doesn't change, a happiness that's total. At that point, there's no need for desire because all our desires come from a sense of lack—and this has no sense of lack at all.

Remember what Ven. Sāriputta had to say when he was asked what to tell people when they asked, "What does the Buddha teach?" Sāriputta's answer was, "Our teacher teaches the subduing of desire and passion." Why is that? Because we suffer when things for which we have desire and passion change in ways that go against our desires. On top of that, we have many conflicting desires that pull us in contrary directions.

But then the next question was, "Why would the Buddha teach this?" Sāriputta's answer was that we can stop suffering when we reach the end of desire and passion for the aggregates. That's something worth desiring.

So, the Buddha's not just describing things for the sake of painting a world view to impress people. He's teaching out of compassion. He has a path of practice that leads to the end of suffering. This requires developing skills, and these skills in turn require that you desire to master them. This means you have to think strategically. In other words, you use desire to get to the end of desire.

Now, remember the Buddha's strategy. The first step is to bring knowledge to the process of how desires are formed and judged, seeing how the mind is doing this all the time. The second step is to judge your desires against the best possible desire, which is the total end of suffering and stress. Sticking to this one overriding desire will ultimately be a source of unity within the heart because you're no longer pulled in opposing directions by your desires. The third step requires that you observe the mind in action. In other words, you're not just dealing in abstractions. You have to watch the mind as it actually forms and judges its desires. Now, the mind is best observed when it's learning to do something good for the mind in a state of stillness, mastering the skills of mindfulness and concentration. So you use desires to master these skills, combatting any other contrary desires, and then ultimately you have to abandon skillful desires, too.

In confronting unskillful desires, you need a strong healthy sense of self, because there will be some conflict in the mind. When there's conflict between desires, your sense of self comes to the fore, as you have to choose which desires to identify with. This is especially the case as you're beginning with the skills of the path. The desires that go against the path are still strong, and you've identified with them many times in the past. So you have to make a deliberate point of switching your allegiances, identifying with the desires that will help you along the way and deliberately *not* identifying with contrary desires. This is how perceptions of self and not-self are used on this stage of the path. You apply the perception of self to the things that keep you on the path, and not-self to the things that would pull you away.

As your skills develop and grow strong, the conflict grows less, and your sense of self doesn't meet up with so much opposition, so it comes less into consciousness. This allows you to focus directly on actions in and of themselves. You find that the idea of self is also an action: You use it when it's skillful and you let it go when it's not.

During this retreat, we've considered several of the Buddha's teachings on how to master this approach. They come down to two sorts. One is a set of values and the other is a set of techniques. The values come from the four determinations: discernment, truth, relinquishment, and calm. This set of values also gets expressed in the six objects of delight: delight in the Dhamma,

delight in developing, delight in abandoning, delight in seclusion, the unafflicted, and no conflict.

These two sets of values are closely related.

- Delight in the Dhamma is related to being determined on discernment and truth.
- Delight in developing and abandoning is related to being determined on truth and relinquishment.
- And delight in seclusion, the unafflicted, and no conflict is related to being determined on calm.

Now, there's an unusual dynamic in these determinations. They are aspects of the goal to which we aspire and they're also the means by which we get there. In both cases, we practice for the sake of truth and calm. In terms of the means, the Buddha says, "Don't neglect discernment," which means always keep the long-term consequences of your actions in the mind. Second, "Guard the truth," which means to be very clear to yourself about where your ideas and your beliefs come from. Third and fourth, "Be committed to relinquishment" and "Train only for calm." Note that even on the level of means, calm is stated as a purpose.

When the determinations are expressed as goals or ends, we find that the four are divided in another way. Truth and calm are attributes of nibbāna, whereas the highest forms of discernment and relinquishment occur immediately before the experience of the deathless and then fall away. So truth and calm are our overriding values. That's what we're practicing for: so that truth and calm become true attributes of our own hearts and minds. Those are the values.

As for the techniques, we master the four bases for success and the noble eightfold path within the framework of these determinations. Maintaining this framework is what makes these strategies skillful. In other words, you can apply the bases for success to any project, good or bad, and as you may have heard, you can even use mindfulness to rob a bank. But when you're ardent in actually devoting these techniques to the ideals of calm and truth, then the techniques become skillful.

To stay on the noble path, you use the Buddha's five-step program to keep you on course. In other words, if anything comes up to pull you off the path, you look for its origination. Then you look to see how it passes away. You try to find its allure, and then you compare that allure with the drawbacks. When you're true to yourself—when you actually see what the allure is, and that it's basically lying to you—that's when you develop dispassion for it. That's how you escape, freeing yourself from whatever unskillful qualities arise in the mind.

You use these five steps as you try to make your concentration more calm and true. The Buddha describes how this is done, basically saying that you get the mind into a state as still as you can. Then after you've enjoyed it for a while, if you see any disturbance, you let it go, and the mind goes into a deeper state of calm. You appreciate your sense of emptiness from that previous disturbance, and then you look to see if there's any remaining subtler disturbance. You see the drawbacks of that disturbance, develop dispassion for its cause, and then escape from it. This, by the way, is how the Buddha uses the concept of emptiness in concentration practice: You try to get the mind empty of disturbance step by step in this way. In other words, you apply the five-step program to imperfections in the path to make it empty of imperfections.

Then, as you approach the end of the path, the Buddha has you apply the five-step program to all five faculties: the faculties of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. These are another way of expressing the noble eightfold path. For example, you look at your concentration. You've become sensitive to how it originates and how it passes away. You've come to appreciate its allure in the sense that it gives a great sense of peace and well-being. But now you begin to focus on its drawbacks. It's at this point when you can get a strong sense of dispassion for it because of its drawbacks.

Of course, the drawbacks have to do with the fact that it's fabricated and so you have to keep working at it to maintain it. The mind develops dispassion for that. It wants to find a happiness that doesn't need to be maintained, so it truly inclines to the unfabricated happiness of the deathless. That's how it escapes even from the path.

This cost-benefit analysis, you might call it, is done in light of the third noble truth, accepting the possibility that there is something better than concentration and that an unfabricated happiness is possible.

In other words, if you think that concentration is the best thing possible, you're not going to let it go. But if you take the Buddha seriously when he says there's something better, then you're more open to the idea that it's better at that point to let go.

This process applies to all the factors of the path. Right view is another example. Right view says that anything that's fabricated is inconstant, anything inconstant is stressful, so it should be let go. You use this view as a working hypothesis to let go of all your attachments to other things. But then you finally realize that right view itself is fabricated. It, too, is inconstant and stressful, so it, too, has to be let go. You develop dispassion for it and are freed from it.

Now, to go through this process requires that you see dispassion as a good thing. As we noted earlier, it's not a state of dull resignation. It's more a sense of developing maturity, as when you've outgrown tic-tac-toe because it no longer captures your interest. You realize that dispassion leads to greater freedom, greater happiness. At this point, you relinquish all fabrications—because you see that they're deceptive disturbances—in favor of what's undeceptive and truly peaceful.

You come to a basic level of verbal and mental fabrications in the mind. These are the fabrications that keep the present moment going and also maintain your sense of self. You start asking yourself, "Who's talking to whom in here? Who is signaling messages to whom? Why?" These fabrications seem pointless. When they seem pointless, you let them go. With no fabrications, the present moment has nothing to shape it, so it falls away.

At the same time, all three of your senses of self—the self as the agent, the consumer, and the commentator—fall away as well. You see for yourself that there's a dimension of consciousness that doesn't require fabrication. It's beyond the aggregates. It's beyond the six senses. It's ultimate happiness and total freedom.

The remainder of your life is lived, then, in the light of knowing that that's the case.

Now, this may seem far away, but you can still benefit by applying the Buddha's approach to your life even if you don't go that far. There's a lot to be gained by focusing on your actions, because these things are really yours.

Ajaan Suwat, toward the end of his life, had a bad car accident in which he sustained a lot of brain damage. From that point on, he wasn't able to give long Dhamma talks, so he would focus on the things that were really, really important. One of the points he would make again and again was that even though the Buddha says so many things are not-self, our actions are ours. In the Pāli, it's "*Kammassako'mhi:* I am the owner of my actions." Then he would add, "Focus on what's genuinely yours. Take care of your responsibility first, because the world can't do these things for you."

This morning I was talking with Dhruv, and he said, "The people are beginning to talk. They're heading back to reality." And I said, "No, no, no, no. They'll just go back to a different world. They're going back to a world that basically says, 'Take care of what we want you to do. As for what are really your true needs, we don't even want to talk about those.'" The world tells you that what other people are doing someplace else is the most important thing to know. But the Buddha is basically saying that what you're doing right now is the most important thing in your life.

Here we come to another teaching that Ajaan Suwat would repeat frequently toward the end of his life, which is to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. The question is, "What does that mean?" It doesn't mean the Buddha's going to come down and protect you from our political leaders. What it means is that you take the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha as your examples. They found true happiness, and if you develop their qualities in your mind and in your actions, you'll find true happiness, too. These qualities include wisdom, compassion, purity, virtue, concentration, discernment. These are your protections. Politicians can still hurt you physically and economically, but they can't hurt anything that's of real value within you.

These principles were true in the time of the Buddha and they're still true today, no matter what the rest of the world tells you, even if it tells you that *it* is the true reality. True reality, genuinely true reality, is basically the principle of your actions and their results. So do your best to make your actions skillful.

This means that there's a lot to be gained by,

- one, learning to observe your mind in action to see how it fashions desires in the present moment.
- Two, establish priorities among your desires, giving priority to those that lead to long-term welfare and happiness;
- Three, loosen up your beliefs of what you're capable of doing. Don't be too fixed in your ideas of what you can and cannot do. Try to get away from any limiting sense of self.
- Four, learn to relinquish lesser pleasures for the sake of greater happiness. In this way you grow more mature. You must be willing to lose a few chess pieces so that you can win the game.

This is training in observing the mind in action through commitment and reflection. In other words, you don't just watch the mind, willy-nilly doing whatever its moods may dictate. You're trying to master a skill, and especially the skills of mindfulness and concentration. You commit yourself to these practices and then develop what's called metacognition by observing and observing to see how you can do them better and better. That's in the area of skill and technique.

As for establishing priorities among your desires, that's a matter of values. Expect your values to become more mature as you develop the skills of self-observation such as mindfulness and concentration. The more pleasure you can find in concentration, the easier it is to say No to unskillful desires, both because you have something better to compare them with and because you'll be able to recognize them as unskillful on your own, without the Buddha's having to tell you.

Now, don't think of yourself as taking on the whole world alone. As the Buddha said, a lot of the practice depends on developing what he calls

admirable friendship, which means finding the people who are characterized by four qualities.

- They have conviction in the principle of kamma,
- they're virtuous,
- they're generous, and
- they have discernment.

As you stay with these people, it helps to reinforce these values within yourself. But as the Buddha said, you don't just hang around people like that. If you find that there are people with conviction, you try to emulate their conviction. If you have trouble doing that, you can ask them, "How do you do this?" The same with virtue, generosity, and discernment. In other words, admirable friendship doesn't mean just having admirable friends. It means learning how to develop their qualities within yourself, so that you become your own admirable friend.

It's now up to us how much we want to borrow the Buddha's wisdom for the sake of lessening or even better, eliminating the sufferings of our lives. Try not to sell yourself short. Don't let your old ideas of your limitations get in the way. You'll benefit by following the path even partway, but you'll benefit even more if you follow it as far as you can. As we said the other night, learn to find delight in developing and abandoning. You have the potential strengths within you to overcome the mind states that would hold you in slavery: qualities like greed, aversion, and delusion. Learn to enjoy the struggle. Be up to the challenge of finding those potentials and making them a reality.

The Buddha's goal may seem daunting, but remember that it was taught by a human being, and it was taught specifically to human beings. The path doesn't lie beyond human capabilities. You're a human being. The whole path is intended for you.

(Meditation)

The last time I saw Ajaan Suwat was just a few months before he died. He complained that his brain was sending him strange perceptions. I took that as a good sign, that he still retained his powers of mindfulness in that he

recognized the perceptions as strange. But then he said something really important. He said, “But that thing I got through my practice, that hasn’t changed.” That thing, of course, would be something that is not affected by illness or the death of the body. Nothing in the world can affect it. So that possibility is there: that there is something valuable inside you that no one else in the world can know about, and nothing in the world can take away.

Readings

§1. "'All phenomena are rooted in desire.
"'All phenomena come into play through attention.
"'All phenomena have contact as their origination.
"'All phenomena have feeling as their meeting place.
"'All phenomena have concentration as their presiding state.
"'All phenomena have mindfulness as their governing principle.
"'All phenomena have discernment as their surpassing state.
"'All phenomena have release as their heartwood.
"'All phenomena gain footing in the deathless.
"'All phenomena have unbinding as their final end.'" — AN 10:58

§2. "And what is the stress of *not getting what is wanted?* In beings subject to birth, the wish arises, 'O, may we not be subject to birth, and may birth not come to us.' But this is not to be achieved by wishing. This is the stress of not getting what is wanted. In beings subject to aging... illness... death... sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair, the wish arises, 'O, may we not be subject to aging... illness... death... sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair, and may aging... illness... death... sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair not come to us.' But this is not to be achieved by wishing. This is the stress of not getting what is wanted." — DN 22

§3. "And which is the noble search? There is the case where a person, himself being subject to birth, seeing the drawbacks of birth, seeks the unborn, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding. Himself being subject to aging... illness... death... sorrow... defilement, seeing the drawbacks of aging... illness... death... sorrow... defilement, seeks the aging-less, illness-less, deathless, sorrow-less, undefiled, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding. This is the noble search.

“I, too, monks, before my self-awakening, when I was still just an unawakened Bodhisatta, being subject myself to birth, sought what was likewise subject to birth. Being subject myself to aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement, sought (happiness in) what was likewise subject to aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement. The thought occurred to me, ‘Why do I, being subject myself to birth, seek what is likewise subject to birth? Being subject myself to aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement, why do I seek what is likewise subject to aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement? What if I, being subject myself to birth, seeing the drawbacks of birth, were to seek the unborn, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding? What if I, being subject myself to aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement, seeing the drawbacks of aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement, were to seek the aging-less, illness-less, deathless, sorrow-less, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding?’ …

“Then, monks, being subject myself to birth, seeing the drawbacks of birth, seeking the unborn, unexcelled rest from the yoke, unbinding, I reached the unborn, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding. Being subject myself to aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement, seeing the drawbacks of aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement, seeking the aging-less, illness-less, deathless, sorrow-less, unexcelled rest from the yoke, unbinding, I reached the aging-less, illness-less, deathless, sorrow-less, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding. Knowledge & vision arose in me: ‘Unprovoked is my release.3 This is the last birth. There is now no further becoming.’” — MN 26

§4. “And what is the noble truth of the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress? Just this very noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.” — DN 22

§5. “Among whatever fabricated phenomena there may be, the noble eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration—is considered supreme.” — *Iti* 90

§6. "And what is right resolve? Right resolve, I tell you, is of two sorts: There is right resolve with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in the acquisitions [of becoming]; and there is noble right resolve, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

"And what is the right resolve with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions? Resolve for renunciation, resolve for non-ill will, resolve for harmlessness. This is the right resolve with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions.

"And what is the right resolve that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path? The thinking, directed thinking, resolve, mental fixity, mental transfixion, focused awareness, & verbal fabrications [directed thought & evaluation] in one developing the noble path whose mind is noble, whose mind is without effluents, who is fully possessed of the noble path. This is the right resolve that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

"One makes an effort for the abandoning of wrong resolve & for entering right resolve: This is one's right effort. One is mindful to abandon wrong resolve & to enter & remain in right resolve: This is one's right mindfulness. Thus these three qualities—right view, right effort, & right mindfulness—run & circle around right resolve." — MN 117

§7. "And what, monks, is right effort? (i) There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen. (ii) He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen. (iii) He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen. (iv) He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen. This, monks, is called right effort." — SN 45:8

§8. "'A person has four determinations.' Thus it was said. In reference to what was it said? These are the four determinations: the determination for discernment, the determination for truth, the determination for relinquishment, the determination for calm. 'A person has four determinations.' Thus it was said, and in reference to this was it said.

"'One should not be negligent of discernment, should guard the truth, be devoted to relinquishment, and train only for calm.'" — MN 140

§9.
May all beings be happy at heart.
Let no one deceive another
or despise anyone anywhere,
or, through anger or resistance-perception,
wish for another to suffer.

As a mother would risk her life
to protect her child, her only child,
even so should one cultivate the heart limitlessly
with regard to all beings.
With goodwill for the entire cosmos,
cultivate the heart limitlessly:
above, below, & all around,
unobstructed, without hostility or hate.
Whether standing, walking,
sitting, or lying down,
    as long as one has banished torpor,
one should be determined on this mindfulness.
This is called a Brahmā abiding
here. — Sn 1:8

§10. I have heard that on one occasion Ven. Ānanda was staying near Kosambī at Ghosita's monastery. Then Uṇṇābha the brahman went to Ven. Ānanda and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was

sitting there he said to Ven. Ānanda: “Master Ānanda, what is the aim of this holy life lived under Gotama the contemplative?”

“Brahman, the holy life is lived under the Blessed One with the aim of abandoning desire.”

“Is there a path, is there a practice, for the abandoning of that desire?”

“Yes, there is a path, there is a practice, for the abandoning of that desire.”

“What is the path, the practice, for the abandoning of that desire?”

“Brahman, there is the case where a monk develops the base of power endowed with concentration founded on desire & the fabrications of exertion. He develops the base of power endowed with concentration founded on persistence… concentration founded on intent… concentration founded on discrimination & the fabrications of exertion. This, brahman, is the path, this is the practice for the abandoning of that desire.”

“If that’s so, Master Ānanda, then it’s an endless path, and not one with an end, for it’s impossible that one could abandon desire by means of desire.”

“In that case, brahman, let me cross-question you on this matter. Answer as you see fit. What do you think? Didn’t you first have desire, thinking, ‘I’ll go to the monastery,’ and then when you reached the monastery, wasn’t that particular desire allayed?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Didn’t you first have persistence, thinking, ‘I’ll go to the monastery,’ and then when you reached the monastery, wasn’t that particular persistence allayed?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Didn’t you first have the intent, thinking, ‘I’ll go to the monastery,’ and then when you reached the monastery, wasn’t that particular intent allayed?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Didn’t you first have (an act of) discrimination, thinking, ‘I’ll go to the monastery,’ and then when you reached the monastery, wasn’t that particular act of discrimination allayed?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So it is with an arahant whose effluents are ended, who has reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, totally destroyed the fetter of becoming, and who is released through right gnosis. Whatever desire he first had for the attainment of arahantship, on attaining arahantship that particular desire is allayed. Whatever persistence he first had for the attainment of arahantship, on attaining arahantship that particular persistence is allayed. Whatever intent he first had for the attainment of arahantship, on attaining arahantship that particular intent is allayed. Whatever discrimination he first had for the attainment of arahantship, on attaining arahantship that particular discrimination is allayed. So what do you think, brahman? Is this an endless path, or one with an end?”

“You’re right, Master Ānanda. This is a path with an end, and not an endless one. Magnificent, Master Ānanda! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to show the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way has Master Ānanda—through many lines of reasoning—made the Dhamma clear. I go to Master Gotama for refuge, to the Dhamma, and to the Saṅgha of monks. May Master Ānanda remember me as a lay follower who has gone for refuge, from this day forward, for life.” — SN 51:15

§11. “There is the case where a monk develops the base of power endowed with concentration founded on desire & the fabrications of exertion, thinking, ‘This desire of mine will be neither overly sluggish nor overly active, neither inwardly restricted nor outwardly scattered.’....

“And how is desire overly sluggish? Whatever desire is accompanied by laziness, conjoined with laziness, that is called overly sluggish desire.

“And how is desire overly active? Whatever desire is accompanied by restlessness, conjoined with restlessness, that is called overly active desire.

“And how is desire inwardly restricted? Whatever desire is accompanied by sloth & drowsiness, conjoined with sloth & drowsiness, that is called inwardly restricted desire.

"And how is desire outwardly scattered? Whatever desire is stirred up by the five strands of sensuality, outwardly dispersed & dissipated, that is called outwardly scattered desire." — SN 51:20

§12. "'This body comes into being through craving. And yet it is by relying on craving that craving is to be abandoned.' Thus it was said. And in reference to what was it said? There is the case, sister, where a monk hears, 'The monk named such-&-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered & remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having known & realized them for himself in the here & now.' The thought occurs to him, 'I hope that I, too, will—through the ending of the effluents—enter & remain in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for myself right in the here & now.' Then, at a later time, he abandons craving, having relied on craving. 'This body comes into being through craving. And yet it is by relying on craving that craving is to be abandoned.' Thus it was said. And in reference to this was it said.

"'This body comes into being through conceit. And yet it is by relying on conceit that conceit is to be abandoned.' Thus it was said. And in reference to what was it said? There is the case, sister, where a monk hears, 'The monk named such-&-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered & remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for himself right in the here & now.' The thought occurs to him, 'The monk named such-&-such, they say, through the ending of the effluents, has entered & remains in the effluent-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for himself right in the here & now. Then why not me?' Then, at a later time, he abandons conceit, having relied on conceit. 'This body comes into being through conceit. And yet it is by relying on conceit that conceit is to be abandoned.' Thus it was said, and in reference to this was it said." — AN 4:159

§13. "And what is the self as a governing principle? There is the case where a monk, having gone to a wilderness, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty

dwelling, reflects on this: 'It is not for the sake of robes that I have gone forth from the home life into homelessness; it is not for the sake of almsfood, for the sake of lodgings, or for the sake of this or that state of (future) becoming that I have gone forth from the home life into homelessness. Simply that I am beset by birth, aging, & death; by sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs; beset by stress, overcome with stress, (and I hope,) "Perhaps the end of this entire mass of suffering & stress might be known!" Now, if I were to seek the same sort of sensual pleasures that I abandoned in going forth from home into homelessness—or a worse sort—that would not be fitting for me.' So he reflects on this: 'My persistence will be aroused & not lax; my mindfulness established & not confused; my body calm & not aroused; my mind centered & unified.' Having made himself his governing principle, he abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is unblameworthy, and looks after himself in a pure way. This is called the self as a governing principle" — AN 3:40

§14. "And what are the six kinds of house-based distress? The distress that arises when one regards as a non-acquisition the non-acquisition of forms cognizable by the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, connected with worldly baits—or when one recalls the previous non-acquisition of such forms after they have passed, ceased, & changed: That is called house-based distress. [Similarly with sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, & ideas.]

"And what are the six kinds of renunciation-based distress? The distress coming from the longing that arises in one who is filled with longing for the unexcelled liberations when—experiencing the inconstancy of those very forms, their change, fading, & cessation—he sees with right discernment as it has come to be that all forms, both before and now, are inconstant, stressful, subject to change and he is filled with this longing: 'O when will I enter & remain in the dimension2 that the noble ones now enter & remain in?' This is called renunciation-based distress. [Similarly with sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, & ideas.] ...

"By depending & relying on the six kinds of renunciation-based distress, abandon & transcend the six kinds of house-based distress. Such is their abandoning, such is their transcending." — MN 137

§15. "And how is striving fruitful, how is exertion fruitful? ...

"Suppose that a man is in love with a woman, his mind ensnared with fierce desire, fierce passion. He sees her standing with another man, chatting, joking, & laughing. What do you think, monks? As he sees her standing with another man, chatting, joking, & laughing, would sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair arise in him?"

"Yes, lord. Why is that? Because he is in love with her, his mind ensnared with fierce desire, fierce passion...."

"Now suppose the thought were to occur to him, 'I am in love with this woman, my mind ensnared with fierce desire, fierce passion. When I see her standing with another man, chatting, joking, & laughing, then sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair arise within me. Why don't I abandon my desire & passion for that woman?' So he abandons his desire & passion for that woman, and afterwards sees her standing with another man, chatting, joking, & laughing. What do you think, monks? As he sees her standing with another man, chatting, joking, & laughing, would sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair arise in him?"

"No, lord. Why is that? He is dispassionate toward that woman...."

"In the same way, the monk, when not loaded down, does not load himself down with pain, nor does he reject pleasure that accords with the Dhamma, although he is not infatuated with that pleasure. He discerns that 'When I exert a [physical, verbal, or mental] fabrication against this cause of stress, then from the fabrication of exertion there is dispassion. When I look on with equanimity at that cause of stress, then from the development of equanimity there is dispassion.' So he exerts a fabrication against the cause of stress for which dispassion comes from the fabrication of exertion, and develops equanimity with regard to the cause of stress for which dispassion comes from the development of equanimity. Thus the stress coming from the cause of stress where there is dispassion from the fabrication of exertion is exhausted, and the stress coming from the cause of stress where there is dispassion from the development of equanimity is exhausted.

"And further, the monk notices this: 'When I live according to my pleasure, unskillful qualities increase in me & skillful qualities decline. When I exert

myself with stress & pain, though, unskillful qualities decline in me & skillful qualities increase. Why don't I exert myself with stress & pain?' So he exerts himself with stress & pain, and while he is exerting himself with stress & pain, unskillful qualities decline in him, & skillful qualities increase. Then at a later time he would no longer exert himself with stress & pain. Why is that? Because he has attained the goal for which he was exerting himself with stress & pain. That is why, at a later time, he would no longer exert himself with stress & pain.

"Suppose a fletcher were to heat & warm an arrow shaft between two flames, making it straight & pliable. Then at a later time he would no longer heat & warm the shaft between two flames, making it straight & pliable. Why is that? Because he has attained the goal for which he was heating & warming the shaft. That is why at a later time he would no longer heat & warm the shaft between two flames, making it straight & pliable.

"In the same way, the monk notices this: 'When I live according to my pleasure, unskillful qualities increase in me & skillful qualities decline. When I exert myself with stress & pain, though, unskillful qualities decline in me & skillful qualities increase. Why don't I exert myself with stress & pain?' So he exerts himself with stress & pain, and while he is exerting himself with stress & pain, unskillful qualities decline in him, & skillful qualities increase. Then at a later time he would no longer exert himself with stress & pain. Why is that? Because he has attained the goal for which he was exerting himself with stress & pain. That is why, at a later time, he would no longer exert himself with stress & pain.

"This is how striving is fruitful, how exertion is fruitful."— MN 101

§16. "And how is mindfulness the governing principle? The mindfulness that 'I will make complete any training with regard to good conduct that is not yet complete, or I will protect with discernment any training with regard to good conduct that is complete' is well established right within. The mindfulness that 'I will make complete any training with regard to the basics of the holy life that is not yet complete, or I will protect with discernment any training with regard to the basics of the holy life that is complete' is well established right within. The mindfulness that 'I will scrutinize with

discernment any Dhamma that is not yet scrutinized, or I will protect with discernment any Dhamma that has been scrutinized' is well established right within. The mindfulness that 'I will touch through release any Dhamma that is not yet touched, or I will protect with discernment any Dhamma that has been touched' is well established right within.

"This is how mindfulness is the governing principle." — AN 4:245

§17. "Monks, six qualities lead to the decline of a monk in training.1 Which six? Delighting in work, delighting in talking, delighting in sleeping, delighting in entanglement, not guarding the sense faculties, not knowing moderation in food. These six qualities lead to the decline of a monk in training." — AN 6:31

§18. "Monks, endowed with six qualities, a monk dwells in the here & now with an abundance of pleasure & happiness, and his source for the ending of the effluents has been activated. Which six?

"There is the case where a monk is one who delights in the Dhamma, one who delights in developing (skillful qualities), one who delights in abandoning (unskillful qualities), one who delights in seclusion, one who delights in the unafflicted, one who delights in non-objectification [*nippapañca*].

"Endowed with these six qualities, a monk dwells in the here & now with an abundance of pleasure & happiness, and his source for the ending of the effluents has been activated." — AN 6:78

Glossary

Ajaan *(Thai):* Teacher; mentor.

Arahant: A "worthy one" or "pure one"; a person whose mind is free of defilement and thus not destined for further rebirth. A title for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples.

Bhava: Becoming. A sense of identity within a particular world of experience. The three levels of becoming are on the level of sensuality, form, and formlessness.

Bodhisatta: "A being intent on awakening." A term to denote the Buddha prior to his awakening.

Brahmā: An inhabitant of the higher heavenly realms of form or formlessness.

Brahman: A member of the priestly caste, which claimed to be the highest caste in India, based on birth.

Brahma-vihāra: A mental attitude that, when developed to a level where it can extend without limit to all beings, is conducive to rebirth in one of the Brahmā worlds. There are four altogether: unlimited goodwill *(mettā)*, unlimited compassion *(karuṇā)*, unlimited empathetic joy *(muditā)*, and unlimited equanimity ***(upekkhā).***

Citta: Mind; heart.

Deva (devatā): Literally, "shining one." A being on the subtle levels of sensuality, form, or formlessness, living either in terrestrial or heavenly realms.

Dhamma: (1) Event, action; (2) a phenomenon in and of itself; (3) mental quality; (4) doctrine, teaching; (5) nibbāna (although there are passages describing nibbāna as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *Dharma*.

Dukkha: Stress; suffering.

Gotama: The Buddha's clan name.

Jhāna: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion.

Kamma: (1) Intentional action; (2) the results of intentional actions. Sanskrit form: *Karma*.

Khandha: Aggregate; physical and mental phenomena as they are directly experienced; the raw material for a sense of self: *rūpa*—physical form; *vedanā*—feeling-tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain; *saññā*—perception, mental label; *saṅkhāra*—fabrication, thought construct; and *viññāṇa*—sensory consciousness, the act of taking note of sense data and ideas as they occur. Sanskrit form: *Skandha*.

Mettā: Goodwill (see ***Brahma-vihāra).***

Nibbāna: 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: ***Nirvāṇa.***

Pāli: The language of the oldest extant Canon of the Buddha's teachings.

Samādhi: Concentration; the centering of the mind.

Saṁsāra: Transmigration; the process of wandering through repeated states of becoming, with their attendant death and rebirth.

Saṁvega: A sense of dismay over the meaninglessness and futility of life as it is ordinarily lived, combined with a strong sense of urgency in looking for a way out.

Saṅgha: 1) On the conventional *(sammati)* level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. 2) On the ideal *(ariya)* level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least stream-entry, the first stage of awakening.

Saṅkhāra: Fabrication (see ***Khandha).***

Sutta: Discourse.

Upekkhā: Equanimity (see ***Brahma-vihāra).***

Vinaya: The monastic discipline, whose rules and traditions comprise six volumes in printed text. The Buddha's own term for the religion he taught was, "This Dhamma-Vinaya."

Vipassanā: Clear-seeing insight into the processes of fabrication in the mind, with the purpose of developing dispassion for those processes.

Wat (Thai): Monastery.

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