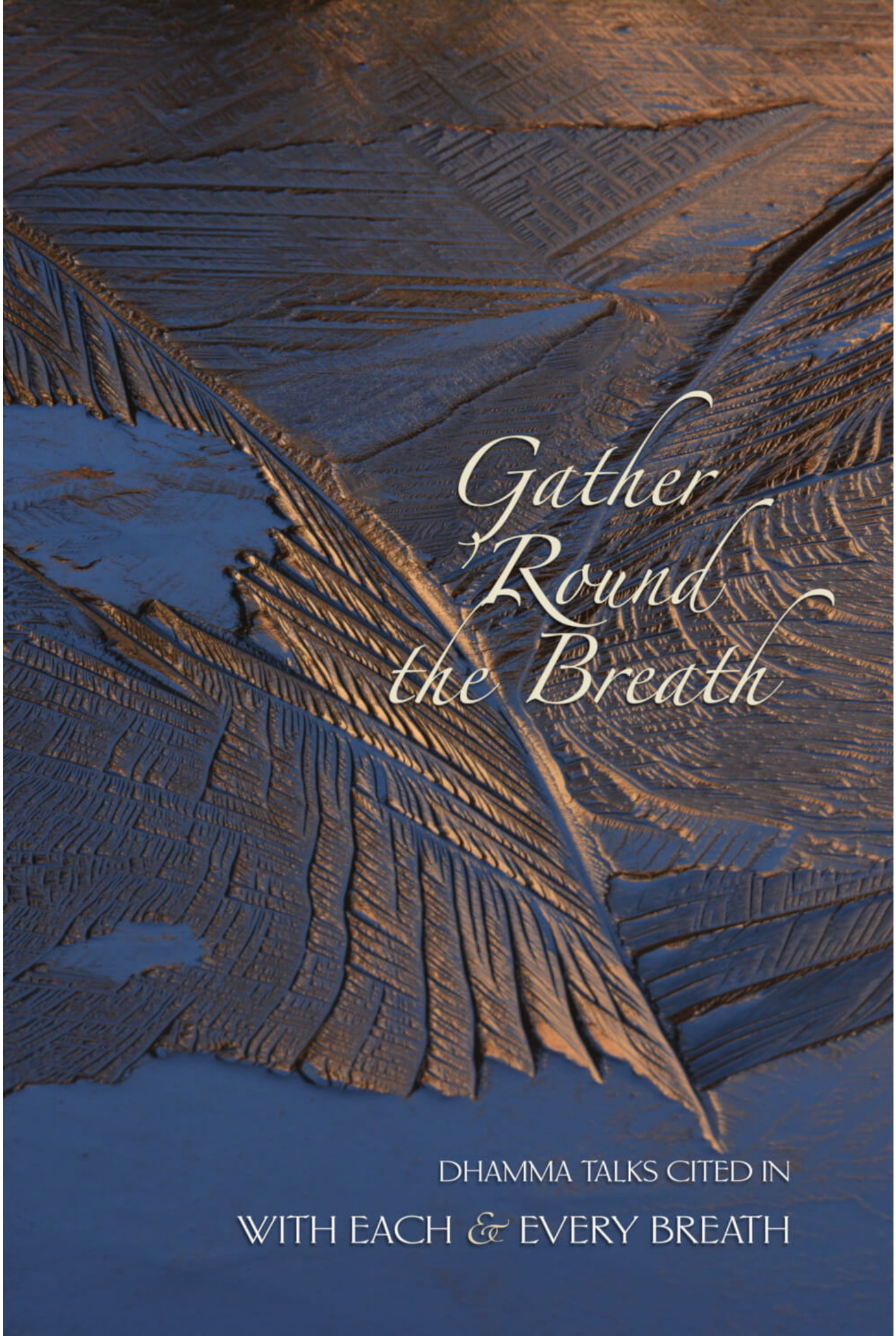
Gather Round the Breath
DHAMMA TALKS CITED IN
WITH EACH & EVERY BREATH

Gather 'Round the Breath

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WITH EACH & EVERY BREATH

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu
(Geoffrey DeGraff)

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cover

Zion National Park (East Side), Utah

The Noble Search for Happiness

June 6, 2007

We practice the Dhamma to create a refuge. It starts as a refuge for ourselves, but it spreads around to protect other people as well. What do we need refuge from? Primarily, our own stupidity, our own carelessness, our own lack of skill. We want happiness—everything we do is based on the desire for happiness—and yet we create suffering, over and over and over again. That's the danger. Of course, it creates a danger not only for us but also for the people around us. So we have to learn to look inside to see why we're not skillful, exactly where the causes for our suffering are, and what we can do about them.

For a lot of us, this is difficult. We don't like looking at our own shortcomings. It's a peculiarity of our modern educational system that we're very rarely taught how to develop skill in areas where we're not already talented. From a very early age, we tend to be channeled into areas where the teachers have noticed that we have some talent or aptitude, and we learn to specialize in those areas. As for the areas where we're not very good, well, let somebody else take care of them: That's the attitude. But what happens is that we never really learn the basic skill of how to learn: how to develop an aptitude in an area where it doesn't come automatically, doesn't come easily.

This is one of the first things we run up against as we meditate. As Ajaan Lee once said, "When you practice, the first thing you learn to see is your own defilements"—your own greed, your own anger, your own delusion, all the unskillful qualities in your mind that you don't like to see. You have to learn how not to get discouraged by them. Remember that everyone meets up with these things in their meditation. And these are not things you get out of the way so that you can really meditate. Getting them out of the way, working through them, is an important part of the meditation.

The other important part of the practice is learning to be very clear about your purpose. We're here for happiness. Notice: The Buddha doesn't say that the search for happiness is a selfish thing. We're not here to deny ourselves for the sake of others. We're here to take our own happiness seriously. When we do, other people will benefit as well. The Buddha discovered a path for how to take the desire for happiness and turn it into something skillful, something noble. This is a noble path we follow.

As we learn to develop balance in our own lives, we help other people maintain their balance, too. The image in the texts is of two acrobats: one acrobat standing up on the end of a bamboo pole; the other acrobat standing on the first acrobat's shoulders. In the story the Buddha tells, the acrobat underneath tells the one on top, "Okay, you look out after me, and I'll look out after you, and that way we'll be able to perform tricks, come down safely, and get our reward." The assistant standing on the first one's shoulders says, "No, that won't do. I'll look after myself and you look after yourself, and in that way we'll be able to come down safely." In other words, if you learn how to maintain your balance, it makes it easier for the other person to maintain his or her balance. The less suffering you cause yourself, the less of a burden you'll be on other people.

So this is not a selfish thing, learning how to train your mind, taking your own happiness seriously. In fact, with this refuge we develop within, we talk about taking the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, as refuge, but the real refuge is when you take their qualities and develop them in your own heart.

What are those qualities? The primary qualities of the Buddha are three: wisdom, purity, and compassion. As he explains them, each of these three is based on your desire for happiness. They're developed through taking your desire for happiness seriously.

Wisdom, as the Buddha says, starts with a question: "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" What's wise about the question? Well, one, it makes you realize that your actions are going to make the difference. Two, there is long-term happiness. And three, you want a happiness that's long-term rather than short-term.

Everything in life requires effort, so you want to find the type of effort, the type of desire, the type of aspiration, that's really going to give you long-term benefits. There's a verse in the Dhammapada: "If you see a greater

happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, be willing to abandon the lesser one for the sake of the greater one." It's so basic and common-sense that one Pali translator said it can't possibly mean this, there must be some other meaning to it, because it's so obvious. Everyone knows that already. Nobody needs to be told that. But if you look at the way that people actually live their lives, everybody needs to be told that, again and again and again.

I have a friend who's a novelist. Each time one of her novels come out, she has to go to the alumni clubs of the university where she teaches and read passages from her novels. In the last novel, the short scene she had selected was self-contained enough that it would make sense in a 10-minute or 15-minute reading. It was of a woman and her stepdaughter playing chess. The stepmother is telling her stepdaughter, while they're playing, "If you want to be happy in life, you have to decide that there's one thing you want more than anything else, and be willing to sacrifice everything else for that one thing." The daughter is half listening and half not listening, but she's beginning to notice that her stepmother is a very sloppy chess player, losing pieces all over the board. So the stepdaughter gets more aggressive—and gets careless as a result. Sure enough, she gets checkmated. Of course, the stepmother is illustrating her teaching by the way she's playing chess. She's willing to sacrifice some of the pieces so she can win.

My friend said that after reading that passage to two or three alumni clubs, she had to stop and choose another passage, because nobody wanted to hear that message. Everyone wants to win at chess and keep all their pieces. But this is the basic principle of what the Buddha said lies at the heart of wisdom: seeing that the happiness that's worth working for will have to be long-term, and you should be willing to sacrifice other things for its sake.

Now, notice that wisdom doesn't mean you ignore your own needs or your own happiness for the sake of others. It starts by taking your own happiness very seriously, and realizing that your efforts are the factor that's going to bring that happiness about.

The second quality, compassion, comes from taking your desire for happiness seriously as well. There's a story in the Canon. King Pasenadi is up in his bedroom with his queen, Mallika, and he turns to her in a tender moment and says to her, "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" Of

course, he's expecting her to say, "Yes, your majesty, you." And if this were a Hollywood movie, you know where the story would go from there. But it's not a Hollywood movie, it's the Pali Canon, and Queen Mallika is no fool. She says, "No." Then she turns the question on him and says, "How about you? Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" The king has to admit that, no, there's no one he loves more than himself.

So he leaves the palace, goes to see the Buddha, and reports to the Buddha the conversation they had. The Buddha's response is interesting. He says: "Yes, she's right. You can search the whole world and you'll never find anybody you love more than yourself. And it's the same with everybody else. They love themselves just as fiercely as you love yourself." Then his conclusion is interesting. He says that if you reflect on this, you would never want to harm anyone else.

There are two ways you can read that. One is the sense of sympathy we have for other people in a position like ours: We all have this in common: this love for our own happiness, this desire for our own happiness. And two, a more pragmatic approach is that, when you think about it, if your happiness depends on someone else's suffering, it's not going to be long-term. They're going to do whatever they can to put an end to that happiness. So when you reflect seriously on your happiness, you have to take other people's happiness into consideration as well. That's the basis for compassion.

Here again, it's based on this principle of taking your own happiness very seriously. And it leads to a noble quality of mind: compassion.

As for purity, the Buddha says it starts by looking very carefully at your actions to see: Do they really benefit yourself and other people? In other words, it's a reality check. You say you want to be wise, you say you want to be compassionate, well, look at your actual actions. When you plan to do something, what results do you anticipate? Are they really wise and compassionate? Are they going to be harmful to yourself or harmful to other people? If they are, don't follow through with that action. If you don't foresee any harm, go ahead with the action. This can include mental actions as well as physical or verbal ones.

If, while you're doing the action, you see harm, then stop. Because in the Buddha's principle of causality, some causes give their results immediately.

You don't have to wait for three lifetimes. When you spit into the wind, it's not going to take three lifetimes for it to come back at you.

But, then again, some results don't show themselves immediately. Which is why after you finish with the action, you look at the long-term results. If you see that, over time, that action did cause harm, then you resolve never to repeat it. If it didn't cause harm, then you can take joy that you're on the path and you keep on training yourself in this way. the Buddha concludes by saying all those who become pure in their thoughts and words and deeds have developed purity in just this way.

There you are, three very noble qualities: wisdom, compassion, and purity. They all come from taking your desire for happiness very seriously, realizing that happiness is not something that's just going to float your way. It comes from your actions, so you have to take your actions seriously. Be careful about what you do. Be heedful about what you do.

This is why we spend so much time trying to develop mindfulness, alertness, and discernment in our practice, applying them to our actions, with the realization that our actions are the deciding factor. They make all the difference in the world between whether we're going to be happy or are going to suffer, whether we're going to cause happiness or suffering for ourselves and others.

As the Buddha says, his teaching is the karma that leads to the end of karma. It's a very special kind of karma. It requires all your powers of observation, all your ingenuity, to lead ultimately to that point where you don't need to do anything more for the sake of happiness.

We were talking today about the sense of self that develops as you practice. It originally gets thwarted in the course of the practice, but the Buddha's not asking you to totally drop your sense of self right away. You learn how to develop a more skillful sense of self by working on the skills of the practice. This sense of self is a type of karma as well. It's something you create. As you get a sense of your talents and your abilities, and you develop those talents and abilities, it's inevitable that a certain sense of self will develop around that skill, which is perfectly fine, because it's part of the karma that leads to the end of karma. You develop that sense of self—a healthy, responsible, capable sense of self—because it's part of your strategy for happiness.

But when you reach the ultimate happiness, you don't need it anymore. You don't have to create it anymore. You can drop it. As Ajaan Suwat once said, "Once you've tasted the ultimate happiness, you don't care if there's a self experiencing it or not. It's no longer an issue because the happiness is there and doesn't need anything else." It's a totally harmless happiness. It doesn't take anything away from anybody else, because it's totally unconditioned.

So this is a noble path and it leads to a noble destination. That's when the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha show that they really are a refuge. They remove the dangers from the mind and provide it with genuine safety, genuine security. There's nothing else in the world that can match it.

Why Train the Mind

October 17, 2011

We practice meditation because we want a happiness that's reliable and harmless: harmless both to ourselves and to other people around us. We want to find a happiness that doesn't depend on the ups and downs of life. Otherwise, it's as if we're riding a roller coaster. Some people get a thrill out of a roller coaster ride, but the roller coaster of life is one that's built without any safety precautions. There's no building code to make sure that people don't get hurt. In fact, everybody gets hurt one way or another. There comes a point where you get thrown off the roller coaster and you die.

But the Buddha discovered that there's a happiness that doesn't require that we take the downs with the ups, doesn't require that we have to depend on things outside. It's a happiness that comes from within. It enables us to have a sense of well-being regardless of what's coming in by the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body, or our thoughts.

This happiness takes work because it's a skill. It requires that we train the mind, and training the human mind is never easy. It's not all that hard to train a dog or other animal. There was once an elephant trainer who came to see the Buddha and said the elephants are plain enough. When you train a wild elephant, he said, it takes around seven days to figure out all the tricks the elephant has, and then you can deal with them. But with a human being, there seems to be no end to the tricks and deceits. But it turns out that there is an end. You can master all the tricks of your mind if you work on the skills.

The first skill is to learn how to set a good intention in mind. We'd like, when the meditation starts, to think that the mind will settle down and there will be nice states of bliss and light, or whatever. To think that way is setting yourself up for a fall. If you're focused on the results but not on actually putting the causes together in the right way, you end up disappointed.

The first thing to do is to remember that we're here to master a skill that requires learning how to get the causes right. Then the results are sure to

come. The Buddha talks about a sense of ease, pleasure, rapture, that can come from getting the mind focused. We're doing this because we want the results, but we know that if we want the results, we have to focus on the causes. And the main cause is very simple: You stay with the breath.

Focusing on the breath is not all that hard. The hard part is going to be staying. Take a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths, and notice how it feels. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. There will come a point, though, when long breathing doesn't feel so good anymore. Then you can change the rhythm and texture of your breathing. You can make it heavier or lighter, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow, shorter, longer. Or you can try in short and out long, or in long and out short. There are lots of ways you can experiment.

See how the body responds; see how the mind responds. Remind yourself that if the breath is healthy, it's going to be good for your body and the mind. It's a resource, though, that we usually don't develop. The breath comes in and goes out on its own, so we feel we don't have to worry about it and we focus on other things. But it turns out that there are many different ways it can enter and many different ways it can go out, and they have an impact on the body. Because of that, they have an impact on the mind.

Make a survey of your body, noticing if there are any places where, when you breathe in, there's tension building up. See if you can consciously relax those spots and still breathe in. Or notice, when you're breathing out, if you tend to squeeze the end of the breath or push it out a little bit too long. See if there's a way you can allow the breath to stop without squeezing it. Before you start squeezing it, you let the out-breath stop, and there will be a slight sensation of floating for a bit, and then you'll know it's time to breathe in again. You don't have to make a sharp line between the in-breath and the out-breath. Just breathe out until you reach a point where you don't push it out. When the body is ready to breathe in, allow it to breathe in again.

If the mind wanders off—and it probably will wander off—be quick to catch it and remind yourself that whatever the thought it's wandering after, you don't have to complete it before you come back. Nine times out of ten, the thoughts you wander off with are old things you've seen many times before, like old movies. You know what Humphrey Bogart is going to say. You don't have to hear it again. For most of us, our movies don't even have Humphrey Bogart. They have people you wouldn't ordinarily pay to watch.

So remind yourself that you don't need those thoughts right now. You don't need that kind of entertainment. You're trying to explore something that's going on in your body, an area that nobody else can know: how your breathing feels.

You can begin to see what kind of impact it has on how the body feels, on how your mind feels. If the mind feels trapped here in the present moment, it's not going to want to stay. It's like trying to keep a child in a house. If you simply lock the windows and the doors, the child will figure out how to shimmy the locks and get out. But if you give the child all kinds of neat things to play with, the child's not going to go. So, in the same way, play with the breath to make the present moment an interesting and pleasant place to stay.

Notice how you perceive the process of breathing. Everyone has a cartoon idea of how the breath comes into the body, how it goes out, and that cartoon idea actually has an impact on how you breathe: As if the body were bellows, you have to squeeze it in, squeeze it out, and the breath can come in and out only through the nose, only through the mouth. But that places lots of limitations on what the breath can do. So try to think of the breath in a different way. Think of it as an energy flow in the body. It flows through the nerves; it flows through the blood vessels. All the nerves go out to every pore, so when you breathe in, there's a sense of energy coming in and out the pores. When you can think of the breath coming in and out from all directions like this, it helps make the breathing a lot easier. You get the whole body helping.

When the Buddha gave breath instructions, he started out by saying to notice when the breath is long and when it's short. As you get sensitive to the way the breath feels, the next step is to breathe in and out aware of the whole body, because that gives you a much bigger foundation. It allows the breath to become a whole-body process, opening up parts of the body that were starved of breath energy before. It makes the mind feel less confined.

If you find it difficult to be aware of the whole body all at once, you might go through the body section by section first. Start down around the navel or anywhere else you'd like. Just figure out a way to get through the whole body systematically: navel, solar plexus, middle of the chest, base of the throat, the head, down the shoulders, out the arms, down the back, out the legs. Survey how all the different parts of the body feel with the in-breath, with

the out-breath, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. If you notice any patterns of tension, allow them to relax and keep them relaxed all the way through the breathing cycle.

If you have trouble figuring out which parts of the body are more tense than others, you might compare your left to your right side, because all of us tend to hold more tension in one side of the body than in the other. Sometimes it's counterintuitive. There may be a sense of pain or stress in one side of the body, but actually that side of the body is overcompensating for a problem in the other side. So try to explore these patterns of tension in your body. When you can sense them and relax them, make it your sport, make it a game. You're playing at keeping those parts relaxed even as you breathe in, even as you breathe out. You'll find that this game opens whole huge areas of the breath energy in the body.

This is the beginning stage of getting the mind trained: i.e., getting it to settle down in the present moment. We want to be here because a lot of important things are happening here, but we don't notice them. We overlook them. The whole reason why the mind creates pain for itself, creates suffering for itself, is because it's not paying attention to what it's doing right here and now.

You want to get clearer and clearer about what you're actually doing here in the present moment. For that, the first thing, of course, is to get focused here. Just be careful not to allow yourself to slip off, because the mind does have its tricks. You start watching the mind in the present moment, and it points off to the future, it points off back to the past. Don't let yourself be deluded into thinking that if the finger is pointing at the moon, you've got to look at the moon. No, just look at the finger: Why is the person pointing to the moon? What does the mind not want you to see in the present moment? Sometimes its intentions are skillful, sometimes not. It likes to hide its unskillful intentions from itself.

This is one of the things you're going to get to see as you get to know the mind in the present moment. It's got some good capabilities, it's got some good qualities, but it's also got some qualities that are not so good. We want to develop the equanimity and the equilibrium that allows us to accept the fact that both of those kinds of qualities are there in the mind. Because it's only when you see them and admit them that you can do something about them. You begin to figure out: Why is it that, even when things are going

well, the mind can still create suffering for itself?—to say nothing of when things are not going well. How does it interact with sights, with smells, sounds, tactile sensations? Are there more skillful ways of interacting?

A lot of the skills you're going to be learning as you deal with the mind are things you develop while working with the breath. You need mindfulness. You've got to have mindfulness to keep the breath in mind. You need alertness to watch what's going on. You need discernment to figure out what's skillful and what's not, what's a cause and what's an effect. You learn these skills in a rudimentary way as you work with the breath, and then you can start applying them to subtler things that are going on in the mind.

That's when you really find that there's a potential for true happiness in there, once you develop the skills. You can see through the mind's subterfuges; you can see through all its various tricks; you see through the walls it throws up inside itself. You can deal with all of the committee members in the mind: all the ones who have other ideas about where happiness should be and why you shouldn't be sitting here watching your breath right now, you should be thinking about something else. As you deal with those voices and can get past them, you find that there are other, subtler ones that have a more pervasive but kind of background effect on the mind. You begin to deal with those, see through them. You basically sort things out inside.

This is how you get to be in charge. The better voices in your mind take over. The ones that already have some wisdom and alertness and mindfulness get stronger. And it turns out that when they're in charge, everybody is a lot happier. There are a lot of committee members that will resist this, but they're foolish. Just like the human beings you see around you: A lot of people would be better off if they learned how to change their opinions. Now, you can't go around straightening everybody else out, but you can straighten your own self out: all the different members of the committee in your mind.

These are some of the skills that we need to develop. And you develop them how? You develop them, to begin with, by learning how to stay with the breath with a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. That provides the foundation for everything else that you'll need to know and master in this skill of training the mind.

Counter-cultural Values

December 22, 2011

There's a part of practicing meditation that doesn't really challenge the values we grew up with. Finding a quiet place in the mind, having a place where you can rest and relax: Everybody can understand that there's a place for that. When the mind is feeling really frazzled, it's very easy to see that meditation is something you want to learn how to master, that concentration—getting the mind still, finding some seclusion where are you can let go—is understandable and easy to appreciate.

But our society gives only so much space for that sort of thing. Once you've rested and relaxed, then it's time to get back to work, the kind of work that they encourage. This is where the practice of the Dhamma parts ways not only with American culture, but what you may call domestic culture at the world over. The work that needs to be done is viewed in a very different way in domestic culture than it is from the point of view of the Dhamma.

There's a story that when Mahapajapati was first ordained, she went to see the Buddha and asked for a short Dhamma teaching that she could use in her practice. He told her about eight values that would determine what is Dhamma and what's not Dhamma. When you look at those values carefully, you realize that a lot of them go against what our ordinary domestic culture encourages.

They fall into three sets. One has to do with the attitudes you develop in the course of your practice. One has to do with how you relate to other people as you practice. The third has to deal with the goals of the practice. All three sets go against our ordinary culture. This is why Dhamma practice can be difficult. But it's also why monasteries are important places, not just for monks to stay, but for laypeople to have the opportunity to come and step out of domestic culture for a while, to look around and see: What do you really believe? What do you really hold as important in your life?

The eight values are these: In terms of the qualities you develop in the practice, there's contentment, persistence, and shedding.

Contentment means being content with what you've got in terms of your physical surroundings: food, clothing, shelter, medicine, that kind of thing. Now, this is not really good for the economy. There was a period back in the 50s when American advisors went over to Thailand. The American government was afraid that Thailand was going to become the next Vietnam, so they sent a lot of sociologists to study Thai values, Thai village life. The sociologists came back with the conclusion that Buddhism was not really good for a capitalistic economy because it taught contentment. Word went out from the Thai government to the monks around the country: Stop teaching contentment. Everybody laughed because they realized that contentment was an important part of the Dhamma. You can't just drop this value for the sake of developing a consumer economy—though, of course, over the years, things have changed in Thailand.

But that's one thing we have to look at: To what extent do you want your life to be dominated by the acquisition of things, being dissatisfied with what you've got and wanting something more? As TV moves into a country—and in Thailand it was very dramatic because it came so quickly—you're exposed to a lot of advertisements that make you miserable. You see all the things that other people have and you don't have, and the advertisements are designed to make you want them, to see that kind of life as attractive.

It's good to step away from a society that has those kinds of views, and remind yourself: That's not where the meaning of life is. It's in learning to be content with things outside you, because you have to be persistent in another way.

The persistence here is persistence in developing the mind, working on the qualities of the mind. Domestic society goes along with that to some extent, but when we start talking about abandoning sensuality, abandoning our possessiveness, abandoning our idea of self, that goes against ordinary values. You need a lot of help in that direction.

Similarly with shedding: Most of us have had a life of accumulating, gathering up this, gathering up that, not only material things but also our pride: the things that we're proud of having accomplished, the abilities we have, whatever it is that we hold on to that we feel makes us better than the people around us. Those are the things the Buddha says you've got to let go of, you've got to put down, you've got to shed. Which, again, goes against a lot of our acquired values.

Those are just three of the eight. The next set of three also goes against ordinary values in society in terms of our relationships with other people: We want to be modest, we want to be unburdensome, we want to be unentangled. That goes against what society wants. It wants us to find our happiness in our relationships.

To get ahead in work, you can't be modest. You've really got to assert yourself, advertise what a fine person you are.

As for being unburdensome, on the face of it, it might sound something like a version of being frugal, but it goes deeper than that. The Buddha says one of the main ways we place a burden on the world is by having a family, creating more people, and then having to support that family. The ideal way of being unburdensome is to be celibate. You simply don't create new people. That goes against the values of domestic society in a very direct way.

At the same time, for the family to function properly, you've got to get entangled not only with the other members of the family, but also with the people you have to work with, the connections you have to make, the networking you have to do, in order for you to be able to support the family. When the Buddha teaches the value of unentanglement, it goes very directly against our social ideals. It sounds very unsociable—and it is. But it's a necessary value to adopt if you want to create the time and space to make progress in cleaning out your own mind.

Then, finally, there are the two qualities associated with the goal: to be unfettered and to have dispassion. Every time I've talked about dispassion with groups of people outside the monastery, there's a lot of discomfort around the topic. It sounds like someone who's dead. But that's not the case. Dispassion means freedom, because your passions are fetters, things that tie you down. Now, as you practice you have to develop a sense of passion for the Dhamma. But eventually even that is something you'll let go of. When you find true happiness, you don't have to be passionate about anything. You're not dead, you've simply found what you want, found what you needed—something that really is satisfying, that doesn't need to be shored up and doesn't have to be looked after—so there's no need to stir up any passion to look for anything further.

These are the values of the Dhamma, and it's good to be clear on the fact that they do go against the normal values of our culture—and not just our culture. We're not her to take on Asian values as opposed to American

values, because even in Asia, even in the time of the Buddha, these eight values ran against the society.

As we're meditating we have to realize it's not just relaxation, it's not just resting so that we can go back to our ordinary lives. We're thinking about a happiness that goes beyond the ordinary, beyond the typical, something that will change our lives. As we meditate, we're learning the tools that allow us to pull back and choose our own direction. Because, as you're sitting here, a lot of those values in the society are sitting in your head as well. The question is: How much do you really want to follow them? If you don't, how are you going to pry yourself a loose of them? You've identified so much with many of them for so long.

Take sensuality for instance: A lot of our society is built on that. According to the Buddha it's a fetter. It's something that ties us down and keeps us coming back again and again and again, to be disappointed again and again. So when it comes up in your mind, what are you going to do? Society has already provided you with lots of arguments for why it's a good thing. If you don't give into your sensual desires, you're going to get twisted, distorted, like that old Ken Russell movie years back, The Devils, where poor Vanessa Redgrave has been a nun for so long that she can't even walk with her head straight. She's been so warped by her celibate life: That's our society's attitude. But if you go over to Thailand and meet the great ajaans, you realize that these are really happy, healthy people and that a lot of their freedom comes from their ability to overcome sensual desires.

So, what weapons are you going to use? The same ones we're using as we meditate. The Buddha talks about three kinds of fabrication. There's bodily fabrication, which is the breath; verbal fabrication, which is the way you talk to yourself about things. You direct your thoughts to a topic and you evaluate it. These are the sentences with which you describe things in your mind. And then there's mental fabrication: perception and feeling, which are the raw materials from which you might talk about things—feelings of pleasure pain, neither pleasure nor pain, and the images that the mind creates to communicate with itself.

When a really strong emotion comes into the mind, it's made of these three same things. But while you're meditating, you're learning to gain some control over them: some control over the way you breathe, some control over the way you talk to yourself about things. When you're sitting here with the

breath, how do you talk to yourself in a way that keeps you interested in the breath and allows you to play with the breath and adjust the breath so that it's a really nice place to be? Then there are the feelings that arise from the way you relate to the breath, and the perceptions you use to keep yourself with the breath, or to make the breath more refined.

You can think of the breath as something you have to pull in from the outside, or you can think of it as an energy that swells up from within. The perception of pulling in is a perception of hunger. The perception of the breath rising up from each little cell, swelling up, and in that way getting the air to come in through the lungs: That's a different kind of perception of the breath—a perception of fullness—and it's going to have an effect on the way that you breathe. If you hold in mind the image that the breath is just able to come through those two little holes in your nose, that's going to create a lot of pressure, especially when you've got a cold and your nose gets stuffed up. But if you hold in mind the perception of breath-openings all over the body, with every little pore a possible breath-opening, what does that do to the way you breathe? You begin to see the power of perception over physical processes like this.

You're getting some hands-on experience with these three kinds of fabrication. As you master them, you want to learn how to use these fabrications to deal with other emotions that come up. Say there's a really strong sensual desire. Learn to look at it as a composite of those three things. There's the impact it has on your breath—and then the impact the disturbed breath will have on the mind; there are the stories you weave around it; and then there are the basic perceptions you hold in mind. Every desire is going to have all three parts. Sometimes a desire comes on and it seems like just a brute force. But if you take it on as simply a brute force, you've fallen for one of its tricks right there. It has its reasons, but usually its reasons are really bad. That's why it's using force.

It's like a bully in the schoolyard. The bully has bad reasons for why he beats you up, so he just beat you up. He doesn't want to talk about it. He just uses a brute force. So, what brute force do you have with which to respond? You want to use all three fabrications. In terms of the force, of course, there's the energy of the breath. Can you change the way you breathe around a particular sensation in the body? How about relaxing the backs of your

hands, relaxing the tops of your feet? Relaxing your wrists? What does that do to the force equation inside the body?

Then look at the stories you were telling yourself about that sensual desire. Part of it will say: "This is how you're going to find happiness. If you don't find happiness this way, you're going to be starved." You have to remind yourself that you've been looking for happiness in that way for who knows how many lifetimes. It's the same old stuff over and over and over again. How about trying to find a new way of happiness? If this kind of happiness were really all that good, everybody in the world would be happy because they're all finding sensual pleasures. But look, everybody's miserable. There's never enough. As the Buddha one said: Even if gold coins rained down from the sky, it still wouldn't be enough for one person's sensual desires. There are all those suttas in the Canon where the Buddha describes the person who is able to overcome sensuality as a true soldier, as a warrior who really is victorious. The fact that we're not pursuing our sensual desires is not a sign of weakness or of our being wimps. It's the other way around.

Those are some of the verbal fabrications that you might use.

Finally, there are the mental fabrications, the basic perceptions that come from your lizard brain. Something deep down inside says: Sensuality is something really attractive, really appealing. It's where you get real satisfaction. But how about looking into the other side, looking at the whole thing?

Ajaan Lee has a really fine passage in his autobiography, where he's made up his mind that he wants to disrobe. This was when he was still a very young monk. He decides he should prepare himself mentally for what it's going to be like, so he starts thinking about what would happen. In the beginning, it's a really nice fantasy. He gets the woman he wants and the best job he can think that he can probably get. But then he realizes that that's as good as it's going to get and then it goes downhill from there. His wife dies, leaving him with a kid. He ends up getting another wife, she has a kid, and then of course there's turmoil in the family. He was able to look at the picture from all sides. That's what got him out of that particular desire.

There's a story in the Canon of a monk named Sundara Samudda. He was doing walking meditation one day and he had a vision of a gorgeous woman standing at the end of the path, her hands palm-to-palm in front of

her heart, saying: "Why are you wasting your young life as a monk? When you're young, that's the time for sensual pleasures. Come and enjoy sensual pleasures with me, and then when we're both old, we can both ordain after we've tasted these pleasures." And in that moment, instead of falling for the image, he had this perception: "This is what the snare of death is. This is a trap, and this is how the trap is disguised." By holding that perception in mind, he was able to get past that desire, and he actually had his experience of awakening. He realized that all the attractions of sensuality were just that: bait for a trap, death's trap.

Those are some of the ways in which you use these three kinds of fabrications, on the one hand, to understand sensual desire, and on the other hand, to undo it. You realize you have the alternative. This is an important part of the practice: realizing that a lot of the things you've picked up living in this society, living in any kind of domestic society, a lot of these attitudes that you've adopted as "your" attitudes, are not necessarily in your own best interest. Maybe there's another kind of happiness. Maybe there's another way of thinking.

This is why the Dhamma is so valuable. They talk about how, as Buddhism goes from country to country, it fits into the society where it goes. Well, Buddhism doesn't do that. The people change the Dhamma as it comes to them. But the people who get the most out of the Dhamma are not the ones who change it to suit themselves, they're the ones who change themselves to fit in with the Dhamma. They use the Dhamma as a tool to find freedom from their cultural conditioning, from their cultural background.

It's important to keep in mind the fact that there are these alternatives. There is another way of looking for happiness. There is a freedom that lies beyond our cultural conditioning. So as we're meditating, we're not just learning a relaxation technique. We're learning to look very clearly at how we look for happiness and at the type of happiness we can imagine. We try to expand our imagination, expand our range of tools and strategies, so that we can find the happiness that really is worth the effort that goes into looking for it, pursuing it, finding it. When we find it, we'll realize that it's more than worth the effort. As they say, it's more than you can imagine. But it is true, and it is attainable, so you always want to keep that in mind.

The Intelligent Heart

April 4, 2012

There's a book about Buddhism I once saw called The Intelligent Heart. That concept is a really good summary of why we respect the Buddha. You've probably noticed that we bow down to the Buddha a lot around here; we show him a lot of respect. That's because he teaches us how to show respect to something really worthy of respect within ourselves, which is our desire for true happiness. That desire is an affair of the heart.

He also teaches us to be intelligent about it. "Intelligence" here comes under the framework of seeing things in terms of cause and effect. In other words, you don't simply go by your desires or your urges in your search for happiness. You look to see which actions really do give rise to true happiness and then you adjust your behavior accordingly.

You might say that the Buddha has us take our happiness seriously—not in the sense of being grim about it, but you would think that with something so important to the heart we would look carefully at what really causes happiness and what doesn't. Yet so many people in the world simply go along with the crowd. They see other people looking for happiness in wealth, relationships, and status, and they figure that that must be where it is. They don't really look very carefully to see: Are these people really happy? You want to look through the PR, look beneath the surface, to see who out there really is a good example of how to find happiness, how to find genuine happiness.

That, in fact, is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom begins by going and finding people who look like they really know—in the Buddha's terms, contemplatives: people who have been contemplating their life and living a very deliberate life, living their lives wisely. Then you ask them: What can I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What can I do that would lead to my long-term suffering and harm? This question is wise not only because you're asking the right people, but also because you see that your happiness depends on your actions, that long-term is possible, and that long-term is better than short-term.

There's another principle that the Buddha teaches: that if you see a greater happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, you should be willing to abandon the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater one. It sounds like a no-brainer, but most of us are no-brainers when it comes to affairs of happiness. We have to learn how to put our head and our heart together to realize that happiness doesn't mean simply piling up as many pleasures as you can, because there are pleasures there that get in the way of a really deeper happiness. You have to make a choice. There are some things you have to give up. It's like playing chess. If you want to win the game, you have to be willing to lose a fair number of your pieces. If you want to win at chess and keep all your pieces at the same time, you'll never get anywhere. So part of the wisdom lies in seeing which things have to be given up.

There are many things we don't want to give up because they provide immediate gratification, and we're loath to give them up for the sake of what seems uncertain down the line. But you have to realize that many forms of immediate gratification are very uncertain in the long-run. They bring a lot of pain and suffering in their wake—either because they're so short-lived and you want to keep grabbing after them even as they're slipping away, or because you do a lot of unskillful things in order to get them to begin with. So you end up losing in both ways. You've got the kamma and memory of the unskillful actions you did, together with the memory of the past pleasure that's gone away.

Wisdom is when you realize that long-term happiness—the happiness that doesn't harm you, doesn't harm anybody else—is worth a lot of sacrifice. But it's not just sacrifice in the sense of having to go without, go without, and then finally hope for a reward at the end. The meditation we're doing here—getting the mind to settle down, being at ease with the breath, finding a sense of well-being inside: That's the food that keeps us going on the path.

We find that simply by focusing on the breath in a way that's comfortable allows the mind to settle down and feel at home in the present moment. That right there is a huge, huge thing. There are so many people who can't do even that, either out of regret for what they've done in the past, or just a simple unwillingness to look carefully at what's going on in the present moment. They're always running around, running around, running

around, and having nothing to show for it really. So it's an important investment to take the time to get to know your breath, get to know the body in the present moment, in a way that allows you to settle down.

When the mind settles down, it has a greater sense of spaciousness. That sense of spaciousness is something you can't buy. So we work on it and we find that it enables us to give up a lot of other pleasures that we ordinarily would think that we couldn't do without.

The training of the mind, as the Buddha said, is the primary requisite for a happiness that lasts: both because it gives you the strength to give up the other pleasures that would leave wounds on the mind, and because it allows you to see more clearly into what your own mind is doing.

When the mind feels an urge to go off someplace else, what's causing that? All too often, we don't look carefully at it. We just go, go, go. But why? What's pushing us out of the present moment? If you can develop a sense of ease with the breath, it'll put you in a position where you can see that happening, and you begin to understand: Oh, it's really very tiny things. And given the sense of space and well-being that comes with staying with the breath, you're less likely to get pushed off by those little, tiny things.

What it comes down to, as the Buddha said—what he calls the difference between a wise person and a fool—is that the wise person sees that true happiness has to come from training the mind. The pleasures you get when the mind is not trained can actually work to your own detriment, and you can get very foolish around them. You end up turning those pleasures into pain.

A much more useful skill is learning how to turn pain into pleasure. In other words, sitting here with a sense of well-being that comes from the breath, even though it may not be totally filling everything in your body and mind, at least gives you a toehold in the present moment. Then you can look at the things that otherwise would push you out, either pains in the body or uncomfortable thoughts that come up in the mind. When you develop this sense of space around them, you can watch them, you can step back from them, learn about where they're coming from, see how the mind creates a lot of suffering around them—and how it can learn not to do that.

We begin with a simple exercise with the breathing. Sit down and take a survey of your body. If you haven't been meditating before, you'll probably find that there's a pain here, a little ache there, this is not comfortable, that

feels tense, that feels tight. But instead of running away from those things, you decide to let your awareness settle down around them. Let the breath gently work on them, and you find that you can dissolve a lot of that stuff away simply by being patient with it and watching it. Even though that's not the end of suffering, you gain more confidence that you can handle these things. You don't have to get pushed out by the pain. And because you're not pushed out by the pain, you don't go thirsting after little, minor pleasures. You learn to develop appreciation for the well-being of a spacious heart, a spacious mind—the kind of mind that's not pushed around by things, that it doesn't get blown away either by pleasure or pain.

The Buddha said that one of the most important skills you can develop is to be not overpowered by pleasure, not overpowered by pain. The mind develops a solidity that enables it to stay right here and not get pushed around. Ordinarily, we would say that being overwhelmed by pleasure is a good thing. But, no, it's not. You get forgetful and get sloppy, and when you get sloppy, then the pain comes in, and you're totally at a loss. The simple fact that the mind gets pushed around by these things: That right there involves a lot of stress, a lot of strain.

You want to develop the ability to be here solidly as these things can wash around you, but they don't penetrate. There's a great sense of well-being that comes from that. You develop a sense that you can trust yourself, and that ability to trust yourself is priceless. That, too, is a kind of happiness that can come only by appreciating it and not letting yourself get pushed around by lesser pleasures and lesser pains.

This is the nature of the intelligent heart that goes for the big prize: a true happiness that's totally unconditioned. What we've talked about here, the pleasure of concentration, is conditioned, but it's a lot stronger and a lot more reliable than the ordinary pleasures that are advertised at us all the time. It provides the opening for us to see deeper into the mind, to see something that's not conditioned: another dimension entirely, outside of space and time in every sense. That's where the ultimate happiness lies, the ultimate well-being.

It may seem far away but it's really not. It's going to be found right here where you're aware of your body, where you have this awareness in the present moment. Try to cultivate your appreciation of the well-being that comes from this spacious awareness right here. In and of itself, it's a much

greater pleasure than the ordinary pleasures around us, and in terms of its effect, it gives us access to something even bigger.

This is what comes with taking the issue of happiness seriously and sticking with your determination to not settle for anything less than a happiness that's totally reliable—and enables you to become totally reliable as well.

Home Schooling Your Inner Children

June 20, 2012

You've probably seen those signs in national parks that say: Leave only footprints, take only memories. But when you leave here, I hope you take more than memories. I hope you take a skill, the skill of training your mind —like we're doing right now: focusing on the breath, being mindful to stay with the breath, being alert to the breath, and developing a quality called ardency, in which you see the disadvantages of having an untrained mind, so that you get earnest and active in doing your best to train it.

Part of the skill, of course, is knowing how to do it. The other part is learning how to motivate yourself to keep doing it. Here the environment helps. You've got a very quiet place with very few responsibilities. Everybody else is meditating, so it's easy to sit down and meditate with them.

When you go home, though, the environment is not going to be that conducive. But you have to think about the environment in two ways. Or, rather, there are two kinds of environment. There's the outside environment and there's the environment that you create yourself. It's not that we're totally victim of the situation around us. Our actions and our attitudes also create an environment.

So you have to develop the right attitudes, and remember that there are going to be parts of the mind that won't go along, especially if this is a new habit you're trying to develop. You sit down for a few minutes and all you see is what a mess your mind is. Then you think: "There's something else I should be doing it right now." Ajaan Fuang used to call those thoughts "Deva Maras." Mara, of course, is the symbol of the temptation, and a deva is a higher being, higher than human beings. These higher beings tell you good things you do: Go fix some food, go arrange this, go clean that up. These are all good things to do in their proper time and place. But you need to have at least one part of the day where you tell yourself: Okay, this is for the mind. All the good things in life, all the good things in the world, come from the mind, and the mind needs to be trained. Otherwise, its greed, aversion,

delusion, and ignorance will just take over, along with all the other members of the committee, and there will be nothing left of your meditation.

Notice that not all of the members of the committee are adults. We do have some children. The Buddha's is attitude is not that you pamper your inner child, although, as the one psychologist friend of mine once said, the only people in the world who have the right to talk about an inner child are pregnant woman. But we do have some very childish members of the committee. They complain. They whine. They squirm. They don't like sitting still. They want to do something else—and they'll come up with some nice thing for you to do so that you don't feel bad about quitting the meditation.

But an important part of the meditation is learning how to sit with the mind regardless of what shape it's in, so that you can understand it—so that when there's greed in the mind you understand the greed, when there's anger you understand the anger. Ajaan Suwat said that when he first went to stay with Ajaan Mun, his mind was a mess. He was embarrassed to talk to Ajaan Mun about his meditation because there wasn't much to talk about. But one day Ajaan Mun asked him how his meditation was going. So, very truthfully, he said: "I just sit there and my mind seems to be distracted all the time." Ajaan Mun gave him some encouragement. He said, "Well, the fact that you know it's distracted is a step up. It comes in the Satipatthana Sutta: Knowing the distracted mind as a distracted mind is an important part of the meditation."

Now, Ajaan Suwat was wise enough to realize that Ajaan Mun wasn't saying: "Good, that's good enough. Just stay right there." He realized that he wanted his mind to be undistracted. But at the same time, he was given encouragement: Everybody has to go through these stages where the mind is just all over the place.

And it's not as if you have one inner child. You've got your whole inner classroom in there. So you have to remind yourself of the ways that you've dealt with children in the past. Sometimes you have to humor them; other times you have to be strict with them. When you set tasks for them, you have to figure out what their capabilities are. Don't think that when you go back you're going to have to sit for an hour every day—and then you find yourself unable to do it at all. Give yourself an amount of time you can manage, that you know you can manage, even if it's just 10 minutes, 15 minutes. It's not too much. Then experiment to see which time of day is

most congenial for you to meditate. For some people it's the evening, but for others it's in the morning, or right after work, or during a break during work. So experiment. See what time is best for your time.

As for the voices that come up that try to stop you, you've got to learn how to counteract them. If they're complaining that you're doing this because of somebody else, remind yourself that you're doing it for yourself. Your mind needs training. You're going to be better off with a trained mind. After all, as the Buddha said, a trained mind is what brings happiness. You can have everything else in the world going really well for you, but if your mind is a mess, you can create all sorts of suffering. In fact, people with untrained minds who gain wealth and power are the ones who create all the big problems in the world. So remind yourself of how important it is to meditate, and how much you'll benefit from your meditation.

But other times the voices will be saying: "I'm being selfish. I should be using this time for other people." When that happens, remind yourself that other people do benefit from the fact that you're sitting there quietly, gaining some control over your greed, aversion, and delusion.

Whenever a complaint comes up, have something to counter it. Don't just give in. Training the mind really is important. Your mind is your most important possession. If you don't look after it, what will you look after? We brush our teeth every day, we bathe every day, we feed ourselves every day: These are things we do to look after the body. We should give at least some time to the mind. And don't complain that you have no time at all. There's got to be some time in the course of the day. Of course, you have to want it enough to make the time. But it is possible to make the time.

This is where you have to learn to use your ingenuity, both in making the time and in making yourself want to make the time. As the Buddha said, a real test of your discernment is seeing the things that you like to do that are going to give trouble in the long run, and learning how to talk yourself out of them. The same with the things that you don't like to do, but are going to be good for you in the long run: like meditating every day. You're able to talk yourself into wanting to do them.

You have to ask yourself: Well, why don't you like it? You're just sitting here breathing, and if the breath is uncomfortable, you've got permission to make it comfortable. Experiment, learn to gain some control, learn to gain some familiarity with your own breathing. After all, this is going to be with

you all the way to the end. If you can gain some sense of how to make the breath comfortable, it makes everything a lot easier. You have better associations with the meditation, so that it's something you remember that you do like to do. It's a comfortable time. Even if your mind is wandering off, every time you come back to the breath make it comfortable so that you have some pleasant associations with the breath.

Get to the point where you realize that when you're reached the 10 or 15 minutes you've allotted to yourself, and it's not quite enough, you can add as much time as you like. It's like building up an exercise routine. If you really push, push, push yourself right at the beginning, you can do yourself some damage. In this case, the damage would be developing an unfriendly attitude toward the meditation. So learn how to pace yourself. How much are you capable of? When does the time come to stretch yourself a little? A little bit more? A little bit more? It's not all that difficult.

The important thing is making sure that your motivation is in the right place: that you benefit, and the people around you are going to benefit. And what else are you going to hold on to in your life as having real value? What's more important than the mind? Even your body is going to leave you at some point. All your relationships with people around you, all your responsibilities: You're going to have to drop them at some point.

You can't wait for the work of the world to be finished and then meditate. The work of the world is never finished. There's always some more to be done, more to be done. Remind yourself of that: that you need to take this time in the midst of these unfinished jobs, at the very least to put your mind in good shape.

If you want to listen to a Dhamma talk while you meditate, that's perfectly fine, so that you don't feel that you're so alone. But you don't have to give your full attention to the Dhamma talk. In fact, the more attention you give to the breath, the better.

In this way, you learn how to deal with all those inner children. The whole point of dealing with your inner children is that you don't leave them as inner children. You help them grow up. Meditation is something that grownups do. It's also something that children do so that they can become grownups, responsible grownups, happy grownups.

So when you set your list of priorities for the day, remember that meditation has to come up, if not first, then at least second. There's a

general in the army I read about one time. She would make a list every day of the things that needed to be done, then rank them in order of priority, one to ten, and then cross out everything from three on down, and work on the first and second items on the list. That's how she got the important things done. In the same way, if the mind isn't your top priority, it's got to be right next to it. After all, the mind is what makes all of your other decisions. Even when the strength of the body is low, if the strength of the mind is good, you'll be able to figure out the right thing to do and you'll have the strength to do it. This is your most important tool, so take really good care of it. Don't leave it just lying around.

The Open Committee

March 7, 2005

The mind is like a committee with an open membership. It seems that anybody has the right to say anything at the meetings. No one ever checks credentials to see who's coming in and with what kinds of intentions. If you sit and watch the thoughts that go through the mind for a while, you begin to realize that a lot of them don't come from you at all. They come from outside—ideas you've picked up from who knows where: your parents, your friends, TV, teachers, radio, magazines. You never can really be sure that the places where these voices came from really meant you well, and yet there they are now, inside you, in the committee.

A lot of the voices have different desires behind them, like people who wield political power and don't show themselves publicly. That makes the voices very strong and often very difficult to deal with. Because their arguments go underground, the real issues are very rarely brought to the surface.

And it's our task to change the committee.

Fortunately, you can take advantage of that open membership by bringing new members in, members you want on your side. The desire for peace, the desire for true happiness: That's buried someplace in you. You can bring out that desire and arm it with concentration, you can arm it with all the techniques you need to help strengthen it. As that desire get stronger, you can begin to set down some rules, some parliamentary procedures. One: that you're not going to listen to any voices in the mind that really don't lead to happiness. That's an important one. That's the beginning of wisdom. Then, two, you make a rule that when anything is proposed in the mind, you want to know what the consequences are going to be.

Then you learn how to strengthen the committee members that are on your side. This is important. This is why we have this practice of concentration, so that we can take the observing part of the mind and really strengthen it, creating a place both in the body and in the mind where you can simply stand and watch things so that you don't easily get fooled by

moods, fooled by desires as they come in and pretend to be pushing this, when they're actually pushing something else—or making a really poor argument, but making it with a lot of force.

All the tricks that you hear and see in outside committees really come out of the tricks the mind plays on itself. This is one of the reasons why people who are very greedy, very angry, or very deluded can be really slick debaters, because that's the kind of debate that goes on in their minds all the time. What you've got to learn how to do is to be more slick yourself, on the side of true happiness.

And practice a concentration that's good, one that creates a sense of ease. That way, you can show the mind that practicing the Dhamma is not all hardship. In fact, there's a sense of ease that goes really deep down inside. If you allow it to seep through the body, let the breath work through the body, around all the knots of tension, it feels really good to be right here.

At the same time, you've got a place where you can observe things as they come, watch them as they go. You come to realize that there really is a committee in here. There are lots of different perspectives. Often one thought seems to consume the entire mind. But as you develop your concentration, you begin to realize that you've got at least one little spot to watch events without having to get involved. That's your strength.

Try to develop that strength and keep it going: this observer that it doesn't get swept up with passions, doesn't get carried away by fancy oratory, just watches what's going on. When you regard this committee just as that, a committee, it helps you to dis-identify from it. No matter how strong a feeling is, you don't have to identify with it. This is one of the Buddha's most important teachings. If you had to identify with everything that came up in your mind, you'd go crazy. You've got the choice. Learn how to exercise that choice wisely. This is why we practice concentration.

If the mind has trouble settling down, do your best to look and see, okay, what are the actual problems that are getting in the way? Don't let them sneak around and stay out of sight. When you want to meditate but the mind doesn't settle down, ask yourself: "Why won't you settle down?" Then wait and watch to see what the answer is going to be. The mind will be quiet, it'll pretend like it hasn't heard, or that the other desires are not there. But you make a rule: "If I don't hear anything, I'm going to go ahead and meditate." At some point, they've got to come out. Then you can see them for

what they are, and then deal with them as they are. Is this a desire that really is in your own best interest? Where is it going to lead? Use the powers of your concentration, the powers of your discernment to make sure you're not swayed by any desires that are really contrary to the Dhamma, contrary to your own true happiness.

In this way, you bring some order into the committee. You've got some parliamentary procedure. You check credentials. When you can bring some order into the discussion, you find that it really does start getting more and more in line with your real aspirations, more and more in line with your real happiness. The committee can start getting united, not united in some crazy passion, but united with wisdom, with concentration, with mindfulness. All the good qualities start working together.

This is a process you can do both while you're meditating and in the course of your day. Don't think that when you meditate you can't think at all. Many times there are issues that have to be dealt with, and in dealing with them, you're getting the mind in better and better shape so that it finally can settle down. And don't think that training the mind is something you do only when you have your eyes closed. The training is to be used all the time, so that you can learn good habits, try to maintain those good habits, no matter what you're doing. Even in situations that seem very far away from meditation, you find you've got to maintain your proper form.

There's a book on swimming technique that says even when you let up in your practice, the important thing is that you maintain good form all the time. It's the same with the mind. These rules of parliamentary procedure have to be followed no matter what. Any voice that recommends things that don't lead to real happiness shouldn't be allowed to speak in the meeting, shouldn't be allowed to have any force, any influence. That has to be your basic law. Just articulating that law and applying it again and again can make a huge difference in your life.

Organizing Your Inner Committee

February 6, 2011

As you meditate, you want to bring the whole mind to the breath. Sometimes it's easy. You're in the mood, everybody in the mind is in the mood, and they all can settle down. But other times, some members of the committee would rather do something else. They have their other agendas, their other desires. Even though they may let you focus on the breath for a few minutes, they're going to try to sabotage it. So you've got to realize, as Ajaan Lee says, that there's more than one mind in the mind. There are lots of minds in here, lots of intentions. It's a problem in the beginning of meditation, but learning to see the mind as a committee can also be something that helps you in the meditation. That perception helps you pull away from some of the more unskillful voices inside you. Even though they're very loud in the mind and a very insistent, you don't have to identify with them.

When you say you're not in the mood to meditate, which part is not in the mood? Which part is in the mood? Why is the part that's in the mood overcome by the other side? Well, the other side may have lined up certain sensations in your body that seem to be pretty insistent and pretty permanent. But you can pry yourself loose. Tell yourself: This is a voice in the mind, and the sensation is something separate. There may be a dull feeling, a feeling of lack of energy, and the lazy voice has latched on to that. Try to pry them apart. The physical sensation is one thing; the voice is something else. It's providing an interpretation, a spin. And just as you have to learn how to look for spin when you're reading newspapers and magazines, you have to look for spin in your own mind, to recognize that it's placed an interpretation on events that you don't have to agree with.

You also want to see which part of the mind is a little bit wiser. If the mind were one single unit, it would have to be either inherently good or inherently bad. If it were inherently bad, there would be nothing you could do to meditate. You could never trust yourself. If it were inherently good, there would be no need to meditate. But it's because we have this committee

that, on the one hand, we need to meditate, but on the other hand, we feel we can't. The solution is learning how to strengthen the healthy voices inside, and learning how to rely on yourself more and more to be able to do this.

Often when we're in a bad mood, we depend on other people to get us out of the bad mood. That's the way it is in regular human society. But going off alone, spending some time alone here at the monastery, requires that you learn how to manage yourself, how to dis-identify with your bad moods, and how to, for the time being, side with your good moods, your wiser moods, your more skillful moods.

Learn the tricks of the unskillful sides. It's not that they're totally lacking in skill, just that their skills are aimed at the wrong thing: a shortsighted happiness, a shortsighted pleasure. They have their tricks and their subterfuges to make you see things their way. So you've got to teach your good side some tricks and subterfuges, too. Teach it to be insistent; teach it to be more strategic. This can involve anything from promising yourself a reward at the end of the meditation—if you stick with the breath for this hour, okay, you get a reward—to making a game of it: See how long you can stay with the breath this time.

The important thing is that, if you find yourself falling off the breath, you not get upset. Because when you get upset, that's when the unskillful voices can move in to take advantage of the opportunity, to start berating you and making you feel bad, pulling you further and further away from the practice. When things go very well, you have to be careful, too. That's when the unskillful voices slip in and get you to be complacent.

There has to be part of the mind that steps back and watches these things without being too quick to identify with any particular voice. Even the voices that sometimes seem like the Dhamma police coming in to berate you for not being a good meditator: Those can be your defilements, you know. You have to convert them to the point where they simply notice, "Okay, you're off the path here, let's move over a little bit and get back on the path." When you're on the path, you don't have to add any further commentary. Just stick with it and try to be more careful the next time—like the policeman who doesn't give you the ticket but simply gives you a warning and sends you on your way.

You find that this relates to different members of the committee as you go through the day. The kinds of conversations you have with yourself, the kinds of things they say to one another, are important—and it's an essential part of the practice to learn how to keep watch over these voices all the time. If certain patterns of conversation get established during the day, you'll find that they resurface during the meditation. If they're unskillful, they're going to cause trouble in your meditation. You've got to keep watch over this constant committee chatter all the time. Try to keep the committee going in a good direction.

This is a huge part of the meditation. We like to think of meditation as all about getting the mind to be really still, very quiet, nothing being said by anybody anywhere in the mind. Now, there are stages in the meditation where things are very, very quiet. But you don't get there simply by squashing all the conversation. You first have to learn how to conduct more skillful conversations inside. The things you focus on, the kind of commentary you make on those things: You've got to keep tabs on this. When you see that an unskillful voice is taking over, you need to learn how to pull yourself out of it so that you don't identify with it. As the Buddha said: All fabrications are not-self. That includes this verbal fabrication in the mind. It's not-self.

For the time being, you want to use that principle selectively. Continue to side with the skillful voices. Identify with them when they're useful. As for anything that's unskillful, learn how to pull out. It's like those times when you're in a dream and you begin to realize that there's something really wrong with this dream, to the point where you finally realize it is a dream: That's what's wrong with it. Then you wake up. It's the same with the different voices in the mind. You can wake up from them. Just learn to realize when there's something wrong with the voice, either in its tone or in what it has to say, or in the effect it has on the mind if you take on that identity. You learn how to question the need, question the desire that you have to have that identity. We've learned some pretty unskillful identities over time. But we have a few skillful ones, too. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here. It's simply a matter of learning how to strengthen the skillful ones, not getting deluded into slipping back into the old, unskillful roles you played in the past.

So take it for granted: There will be a fair amount of chatter going on in the meditation, and don't regard it simply as a nuisance. It has its role, and you need to learn how to conduct the conversation in a skillful way, how to hold the meeting in such a way that the unskillful forces don't take over. When you can, you try to convert them. Because after all, all the voices here are simply expressions of a desire for happiness and ideas about how that happiness can be obtained. When you can convert different voices to the idea that this is really where you want to look, this is really what you really want to do to find happiness, you've made things that much easier.

Learn how to use this committee for your purposes instead of being annoyed by it or overwhelmed by it—the "you" here being, as Ajaan Mun once said, the determination not to come back and suffer. Try to equip that determination with its weapons of discernment and mindfulness, so that you can develop all the other qualities of the path you need to make that determination a reality.

Unskillful Voices

January 13, 2006

Developing a sense of ease in the meditation is important. Having your spot inside the body where you feel at ease, where the breath feels gratifying, feels good coming in, feels good going out, is an important ally in the practice. After all, when you sit down and look at your mind, you'll often see things you don't like. Sometimes they're memories of the past, things you did in the past that you wish you hadn't done, or things you didn't do that you wish you could have done. Sometimes they're urges in the present moment: things that you'd like to do but you don't feel right about doing. You see them there in the mind. If you're going to deal with them, you have to come from a position where you don't feel threatened by them, don't feel weighed down by them. For this reason, you need this spot where it just feels good to stay right here. Work on developing this.

The Buddha talks about concentration as a strength. The images he uses to illustrate concentration usually revolve around food on the one hand and water on the other. Concentration is food and water for the mind. It's what gives you nourishment, refreshment, strength. Without this kind of food and water, the meditation gets very dry. As I said, when you start to be mindful of your feelings, mindful of your thoughts and emotions, you start seeing things that you don't like. Some of us try to put them out of mind, and in doing so we can create a little area of the mind where everything gets shoved away. Of course, those things are going to eventually come back out. They can't stay there.

To deal with them intelligently, you've got to feel good right here. Then you can start looking at them and realizing that what you're responsible for right now is not what you've done in the past, but your choices you're making in the present moment.

Lots of ideas come up in the mind. It's like a committee discussing ideas: "How about doing this? Well, how about doing that?" You've heard about people with multiple personalities, the really extreme cases where they get schizoid and the multiple personalities refuse to recognize each other. That's

unhealthy. For most of us, though, there is a dialogue in the mind, and it's healthy that there is. What's even healthier is when the skillful voices can win out. That's where you can make a positive difference in your life. So it's important that you understand what's going on in the mind and how you can deal with it.

The Buddha's teachings are primarily famous for two things. One is his emphasis on suffering and the end of suffering. Then there's the teaching on kamma. Some people have trouble seeing the connection between the two, but for the Buddha they were very strongly connected. Remember the story of the night of his awakening. His first knowledge was remembering his past lives. The second knowledge was seeing that he wasn't the only person with past lives. Everybody in the world dies and is reborn again and again and again, and they're reborn in line with their actions, which are intentions. These actions are shaped by their views about what's skillful and what's unskillful, what their actions can do, what their actions can't do.

Then he used that insight into views and intentions to examine his own views and intentions in the present moment. That was where he was able to analyze the problem of suffering as it was caused in the present moment. That was the third knowledge, when his knowledge of kamma was able to stop causing suffering and to bring him awakening, to take him to the deathless.

The teaching he gave after his awakening revolves around these issues: What is the power of human action to cause suffering? What is the power of human action to put an end to suffering? A large part of that power requires that you understand action and the results of your actions.

Basically, it comes down to this: The essence of his awakening was a principle of causality. That sounds abstract, but it's very relevant to what's going on in your mind right now. Your experience of the present moment is made up of three things: results of past intentions, your current intentions, and the results of your current intentions. Now, things that come from the past you have no control over. They're going to come, but you can control how you react to them and shape them in the present moment. That's going to make a huge difference in how much you suffer, say, from bad past actions.

The first requirement is that you develop lots of goodwill both for yourself, for the people you may have harmed in the past, and then for all

people, all beings. This helps to open up your mind, get you out of the cocoon of your own suffering. That was one of the important messages in that second knowledge the Buddha gained. His mind opened up to the sufferings of all beings to see that we're all in the same boat.

When you can maintain that larger perspective, you want to realize that what's unskillful in your mind is not peculiar to you. Everyone has been doing unskillful things off and on for a long time. This broadens your compassion. You learn to be compassionate to yourself; you learn to be compassionate for other beings. That right there, the Buddha says, helps alleviate a lot of suffering, because the impact of past bad actions on your mind at that point is a lot less. So compassion is an important part of the practice—not only in alleviating suffering from the past, but also in preventing yourself from creating new suffering now and on into the future.

Look at the way of the world. What lasts? The results of your actions. They register as pain and pleasure. Actions that create pain are a huge, needless burden, both for yourself and other people. You look around at the world, and you see so much needless suffering. It doesn't have to be that way, it doesn't serve any purpose at all, yet it happens again and again and again.

I remember watching my father die. He went through a long illness at the end of his life. It was debilitating not only physically but also mentally. Toward the end he started getting dementia. I kept reflecting: What purpose does this serve? It serves no purpose at all. But it's there, and there's so much of it in the world, so why would we want to create any more needless suffering? There's more than enough already.

Where do you start? You have to start right here, looking at your intentions, and learning to choose from whatever comes up in the mind, from whatever the committee has to recommend, what is the most skillful thing to do. When you start understanding things in this way, that you have the choice in the present moment whether to continue with whatever bad habits you've had in the past, this is where you really make a clean break with the past.

We have this potential for freedom in the present moment yet we don't take advantage of it. That's the big tragedy of human life. Sometimes we look at our past and we say we'd like to make a clean break. And where do you make it? You make it here, each moment you choose to do the most

skillful thing you can think of, the thing that causes the least harm, the least suffering, that leads to the greatest benefit. Each time you make that choice you're exercising your freedom, and the more you exercise your freedom the greater it grows. As the Buddha says, when you exercise it fully, ultimately it leads to total freedom from suffering. There is that potential.

The whole purpose of the path is to strengthen you so you can make the most of your potential.

Conviction in the principle of kamma: That's a strength because it emphasizes how important each decision is. Sometimes there will be a member of the committee that says, "Okay, you can make a skillful choice right now, but in another five minutes you're going to go back to the old ways, so why bother right now?" Don't listen to that voice. It's destructive. Just say to yourself: "Well, I don't care about five minutes from now. Right now, I'm going to do the skillful thing. When five minutes is up, we can deal with what to do then. But right now, I'm going to make the best choice because it's important." You could sit around and think about how the Sun is going to go nova sometime, and everything in the world is going to burn to a crisp, and that would make your actions and choices seem really minuscule. Well, don't think in those ways. It's your life that you're shaping. It's your experience of pleasure or pain, and the pleasure and pain of the people immediately around you, and you can make a difference right there. That's what the conviction in kamma teaches you: that you can make a difference, and that what you choose to do right now is really important.

Then you just stick with that conviction: That's persistence. That's another strength. You learn to be mindful in order to keep that view in mind. You keep reminding yourself: Okay, do the skillful thing right now. If you've slipped in the past, don't worry about it. That's the past. Now you've got the present moment, you've got a chance for something new. That mindfulness is another strength. When you keep at this, you start finding the strength of concentration, where there's a sense of ease, a sense of well-being. Then one of the results of making skillful choices is that it also makes skillful choices easier to make. You're coming from a position of strength. You're coming from a position not of poverty, but of wealth. You've got this food and water for the mind. Ultimately that leads to the strength of discernment, when you begin to see through all of the motivations that would lead you to do

unskillful things. You realize that you don't have to identify with them at all, that they don't need to have power over you.

Those are the strengths you need on the path. As you develop them, you don't only have to listen to the narrative of the Buddha's life, you can start making the narrative of awakening real in your life as well. The trick is to get all of you together on the same page. In other words, put yourself in a position where you can look at all the different voices in your head and start sorting out: "Which ones do I want to start listening to, which ones do I not want to listen to?"

You're doing it not out of fear, not out of repression, when you say: "No, I don't want to listen to this voice." You're not denying that it's there. You don't push it off into a corner where it turns into The Thing that sends its tentacles under the floorboards and up through the cracks to strangle you. You simply recognize, okay, there are unskillful intentions in the mind, but you don't have to follow them. Because you've got the freedom of choice.

That's what the Buddha's teachings on kamma are all about. That's what his teachings on suffering are all about. You put them altogether: We have the ability to create suffering for ourselves, but also have the ability to put an end to suffering right here and now. So make the most of the Buddha's discoveries, and see what good things they lead you to discover in your own mind.

The Kamma of Self & Not-self

May 21, 2005

One of the questions the Buddha has monks ask themselves every day—actually, it's a useful question for all people to ask themselves—is: "Days and nights fly past, fly past, what am I doing right now?" The purpose of the question is to remind you of the importance of your actions, and the ephemeral nature of everything else. How much longer are you going to have time to do the things you want to get done? And what are the things you want to get done? The Buddha says that true happiness is possible. Are you working toward it or are you working away from it? Are you doing what you can for that purpose or are you just wasting your time? The Buddha was the sort of person who never wasted time. Once he had set his sights on awakening, on finding the answer to the question of whether there's a true happiness, a happiness that's not dependent on conditions, he focused all of his efforts in that direction. That was the question to which he gave top priority in his life.

After he gained awakening, that was the question he had his followers give top priority in their lives as well. He defined wisdom as beginning with the question: "What when I do it will be to my long-term welfare and happiness?" That question emphasizes several things: one, the power of your actions to make a difference; and, two, the question of whether you want short-term happiness or long-term happiness. Short-term happiness is all around you, but is it worth the effort? Everything you're going to gain in life comes through effort, comes through your actions. So you want to look at your actions. Are they getting good results or not? And what can you do to get better results? You can learn from your past mistakes, resolve not to make them again.

It's also good to have a picture of what's possible. Some people complain that there's not much room for imagination in meditation. Actually, the Buddha asks you to imagine a lot of things, to open up your imagination to the possibility that there could be an end to suffering and that it's something you can attain through your own efforts. Can you imagine that? Try to get

your head around that idea and think about what it means for your life. Then examine everything you do. Look at your experiences to see exactly how much you're responsible for what's happening.

As the Buddha pointed out, there are two sources for what you're experiencing right now. One is past actions and the other is present actions. Past actions you can't do much about, but you can do a lot with present actions. That's why he has you ask: What am I doing right now? That's why he has you keep on asking that question every day.

You may feel surprised that the question has the "I" in there. After all, the Buddha taught that there's no self, right? Actually, he never taught that. There's no place in the Pali Canon where you can find him endorsing the statement, "There is no self." What he does describe is a process of I-making and my-making. Selfing is something we do. These are actions you do here in the present moment. You take the potentials that come from your past actions and you turn them into an actual experience, and part of that usually includes creating your sense of who you are, either as the creator of an experience or as the consumer of the experience.

But the "I" is something you do. The "me" is something you do. The "mine" is something you do. In some cases, they're useful concepts. It's good to know the difference between your wallet and somebody else's wallet, your possessions and their possessions, your body and their body, your actions and their actions. If you don't have a clear concept of this, you're going to get into a lot of trouble.

But it goes deeper than that. You have to have a sense of your own responsibility, and what you're doing right here, right now. You're the one who intends your actions. You can't depend on anybody else to do that for you. If you're not skillful in the way you react to your experiences, you're the one who's going to have to learn how to be more skillful.

So having a good healthy sense of self in areas like this is necessary. It's how you function and how you progress along the path. You look at an experience and ask yourself: What am I doing to make this experience worse? Sometimes you'll find that there's greed involved, sometimes aversion, sometimes delusion. Who's responsible for those things? You can't go blaming your parents, you can't go blaming society, because that will take you nowhere. If you look for what you're doing in terms of your greed,

anger, and delusion right now, though, you can make a difference. You can do things differently.

It's in areas like this that a good strong sense of self is necessary. It's skillful; it gets results. Because, after all, your sense of self is a strategy for happiness. The Buddha's simply asking you to make it a strategy for long-term happiness. That's what we mean by a healthy sense of self, the sort of person who sacrifices short-term happiness for long-term happiness, where you're responsible for your actions and develop skill.

However, there are areas where having a sense of self is actually counterproductive. This is what the not-self teaching is for, to point out what those areas are. If the Buddha had said that there is no self, one, it would've been a waste of time. He would have been entangled in all kinds of arguments. If you make the statement that there is no self, then immediately the question is: "What do you mean by 'self'? Define your terms." That's a set-up for a long, involved argument that ultimately gets nowhere. The Buddha once said that if you try to take a stance on either side of that question—"Is there a self? Is there a no self?"—you end up siding with extreme forms of wrong view, because you're assuming that the whole idea of a self is a thing. You either have it or you don't have it, willy-nilly. When the Buddha says that the things we claim as self are inconstant and stressful, you could say, "Well, I'm satisfied with those things because that's all I've got. I can't find any better self than that." The discussion ends there. Nowhere.

But if you look at the self as something you do, then there's an immediate logic: You do things for the sake of happiness. There are cases where the sense of self actually does contribute to your happiness, in which case it's a skillful strategy. There are other times when it causes stress and suffering, in which case it's an unskillful strategy. It defeats its own purpose, its whole reason for being, the whole reason for why you made it. When you see that, you can stop doing it. That's the whole point of the teaching.

Once you develop a good, strong body of skills on how to be mindful, how to bring the mind to a good state of concentration, you've taken the sense of self and its quest for a good long-term happiness about as far as it can go. But the quest for happiness doesn't end there. It goes further. At that point, you let go of your sense of self, the activity of selfing, because it's going to get in the way. This is where the Buddha teaches us to look at all

fabricated things as inconstant, stressful, and not-self. In particular, the state of concentration you've worked on: Once it's good and solid, you can see, "Where is there a disturbance here? What am I doing?" Part of the disturbance is going to be a sense of the "me" or the "I." That's when it's useful to let those activities go.

What is this "me," what is this "I" made up of? Five types of things, the five aggregates. The Buddha never says that the aggregates are what you are. He says they're the raw materials that you use to create your sense of self. You take the potential for form, the potential for feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness, all of which come from past actions, and you actualize it. Then you identify with it. But your identity can change from moment to moment. Sometimes you're focused on feelings, sometimes on perceptions, sometimes on the body, either seeing yourself as identical with these things, or as possessing these things, as being inside them, or as having these things inside you. Even a sense of infinite or interconnected self that has a small body of feeling or consciousness or whatever inside: The Buddha says let go of that as well. That kind of self is also unskillful at that point.

This teaching goes against the grain because the constant theme in the back of your mind is always: "What do I do next, what do I do next?" When you're told to stop doing the selfing, who's going to take care of the shop? Who's going to look after things? Well, you look at what it is that needs to be looked after, and you realize: It's not worth it. The activities that you are trying to do to shore up the situations that you feel you need for happiness: Those are causing stress as well. It's when you can see that they're counterproductive that you can let them go.

This takes a lot of skillful looking, a lot of skillful mindfulness, concentration—all the factors of the path. But when you're really honest with yourself, (and that's the first prerequisite for the path; as the Buddha says, "Give me someone who's honest, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma,") honestly looking at what you're doing and what the results are, the point will have to come where you realize you've had enough. You've got to stop. When you have sense enough to see how you can stop, and even let go of the intention to stop, that's when you find there's a greater happiness that you've been covering up with all of your frantic arranging, all of your frantic I-making and my-making. This is why it's worth letting go.

This is why the not-self teaching is useful. It's part of that strategy for long-term welfare and happiness.

We have that promise from the Buddha that when you finally let go of these things, after you've developed them, you're not going to be left adrift. In fact, as Ajaan Suwat once said, you find the ultimate happiness, and when there's the ultimate happiness, you won't care who it is that's having the experience. The question just won't occur to you. The happiness itself will be sufficient. And it won't change. It'll always be there—although the word "always" is not quite appropriate because you're outside of space and time at that point, but with a strong sense of immediacy. We're not sending you off to some faraway galaxy. But there isn't even a sense of "here" or "there." There's no sense of location at all, but there is the happiness.

That's the Buddha's promise—and it's also his challenge to you. What are you doing right now? Is it working toward this happiness or not? This happiness is what makes everything worthwhile. If you can find this happiness in your lifetime, then the narrative of your life has real meaning, a real sense of accomplishment. You've done the thing most worth doing. Are you up for it? Days and nights are flying past, flying past. What are you doing? Keep that question in mind, and keep the context of that question in mind. Come up with your best answer through what you do and say and think right now, right now, right now. You don't have to advertise it to anyone else, you don't have to tell anyone else, because when you really do it right, nobody else has to know. It's that good.

The Need for Stillness

April 12, 2005

One of the famous teachings of Ajaan Dune, who was one of Ajaan Mun's students, is his definition of the four noble truths. The cause of suffering, he says, is sending the mind out, sending your attention, sending your awareness outside, and suffering is what results from that. The path, he says, is having the mind watch the mind, having the mind see the mind. The end of suffering is what results from that. So it's the movement that makes us suffer, and just having the mind stay still right at the mind: That's the path.

Where's the discernment in that stillness? It's in seeing the motions and letting them stop. Ajaan Mun himself once said that a state of totally no motion at all is the end of suffering—the end of the world, the normal world of our experience. Ajaan Dune talks about the same thing, and the Buddha talks about the same thing: There's no coming or going in the awakened mind.

But if we look at our own minds, we see that they're coming and going all over the place. What we're doing as we're practicing is learning to get a standpoint where we can be more and more still, or at least a part of our awareness can be still, so that it can see the motions of the other parts. The more still you are, the more you can see them, from the very beginning to the very end: See what starts them, see how they continue, and see what they lead to.

That's the discernment we're after. Because as soon as you see the whole picture, the whole trajectory, you see the suffering that comes from those motions in the mind, and you also see that you're implicated in them, that there is an element of intention that was a choice. You could follow that motion or you could choose not to. But if it's going to cause suffering, why choose to follow the motion? That's the nature of insight. Once you see that, you drop it.

You can think of the practice as a process of getting progressively more and more still for longer periods of time, and then using that stillness to see

more and more refined movements. If you're moving around a lot, you can't tell when something else is moving. Things that look perfectly still to you may not actually be still. It's like standing under the hummingbird feeder over there. The hummingbirds are zipping around all the time. If you just stand there and move very slowly, after a while they assume that you're a big rock, or a big, solid thing that doesn't move at all, because they're moving a lot faster. It's only when you make a sudden movement that they pick up on the fact that you're there, and that you're a threat, and they fly away.

This is why it's so important to get the mind to be as still as possible: because the more still it is, the more you can see.

There are people who get the mind very still, but then just curl up in the stillness and don't use it to any purpose. That's not what the Buddha taught. You get the mind still and you want to be aware all around. This is why Ajaan Lee, when he defines alertness, talks about it going to back and forth. You look, say, at your breath, and then you turn around and look at the mind. You're alert to both to see how they're connected—and to sense immediately any movement where the mind pulls away.

It's that all-around kind of alertness you want, because often, as the mind gets really, really still, nothing seems to be going on in the mind. But there's still a kind of commentary, just a commentary that says "space, space," "knowing, knowing," or, "nothing, nothing." That's a movement of the mind, too. You've got to turn around and look at that and recognize: "Oh, there's this movement here." Everything else seemed to be still, you thought that everything was nice and still, but there's still this happening. Discernment lies in seeing both sides: seeing whatever movements of thought, or feeling, or perception are going on, and also the part of the mind that seems to be humming along with them, or following along with them, commenting on them. You can see the first kind of thing arising and passing away, and that is an important element of insight, but the other element lies in seeing the part that's commenting on all of this.

Once there was a person from Singapore who wrote a letter to Ajaan Fuang describing his practice, which was to see everything in terms of the three characteristics. When he was at work, when he was watching TV, he just kept noting to himself: This is impermanent, stressful, not-self. Ajaan Fuang's advice to him was to turn around and see who was doing the

commenting, because, he said, the problem lies there. It's not in the inconstancy of TV shows or the stress of your work, it's the inconstancy of this commentator. Once the commentator passes judgment on something, then some intentions arise, and the intentions are what keeps everything going. Until you see that, there is no real, true letting go. Your letting go isn't total. It's only when the letting go is total that you open up to something totally different that has no motions—because it's the motions of the mind that keep the whole process going.

It's like a weaver. It keeps weaving your experience of space and time, and it can weave it with craving, and it can weave it with perceptions, feelings, and all these other things. But that element of intention and attention: That's what keeps it all going. Until you can see those things moving, nothing really disbands. But once your stillness is still enough, and your awareness is all-around enough to the point to where you catch even the slightest movement anywhere in the mind, that's when things open up.

In this way, the practice of stillness is not simply something you do while waiting for discernment to come later on. There will be things that you discern in the stillness. Sometimes it seems kind of discouraging. You try to get the mind even a little bit still, and you notice there's all this movement going on. Well, that's discernment: seeing the movement. Discernment gets more full, though, when you can see the movement from the beginning to the end, to the point that where you say: "That particular movement, I don't want to get involved in." When you don't get involved in it, it drops away. Then everything seems absolutely still. But then the longer you stay with the stillness, the more you see subtle things that you didn't see before. Here again, it's the same process: trying to see them from the beginning to the end, arising, staying for a while, and then passing away. That's when you can let them go.

So the development of concentration is not a waste of time, or a delay in insight. It provides you with a basis for the observer that allows you to watch your thought-processes. You can see: "Oh, if I think in this way, it's going to cause suffering. No matter how long I've been thinking this way, no matter how integral a habit it seems to be for me, I always have the choice to drop it once I see that, one, it's arbitrary, and two, it's causing suffering." Arbitrary in the sense that you didn't have to choose to be that way, or think that way, or act that way. Suffering in the sense that it's stressful—even

minimally stressful. This is how concentration and discernment work together.

All of what they call the noble dhammas—virtue, concentration, discernment, and release—are all related to stillness in this way. Virtue is a way of stilling your actions, the things that you used to do without thinking. Suddenly you realize: "I can't do that anymore." You begin to see that those actions you've learned to stop doing really do cause suffering. You don't have to wait to the next life to see the results, they cause suffering right now. And so on down the line to concentration and discernment: It's a matter of getting as still as possible in your thoughts, words, and deeds, so that you can see the motions of the mind, and let go of any that are unnecessary and cause unnecessary suffering—simply that your idea of what's necessary is going to get more and more refined. The more stable your stillness, the more all-around your awareness.

Even though the idea of release or the deathless may seem very far away from the mind that you're sitting here looking at right now, the processes of the meditation, just trying to get things still, trying to get at least some things still in the mind, and then using your alertness to maintain that stillness, using your mindfulness to maintain that stillness: Those are the tools that, as they get more refined, will start sorting everything out.

Everybody Suffers

March 27, 2005

One of my English teachers in high school once said that a sign of a great mind, a great person, is the ability to look past the particulars of your own experience and see the general principles that apply to everyone. Say you're disappointed in love: You see it in general terms. You're not the only person to whom it has happened. What makes us human, in the larger sense, is our ability to see past the particulars to detect the universal drives underneath them.

But what does that mean, the fact that there is this drive to want to be connected with someone else, yet constantly frustrated by impermanence? What's to be done about this? You can think about it in your own particular terms. You might say, "Well, just find somebody else." Or you can start thinking about the larger patterns of human life. The same applies to any kind of separation, any kind of loss.

This is one of the things that made the Buddha great. Instead of dealing in large abstractions, he looked at the particulars of his life and was able to see through them to the general principle that's common to all experience: Where's there's birth there is aging, illness, death, and separation. These things all go together, and there's no way around it if you keep on living an ordinary life. He questioned: What can be done about this? He saw that the seeds of the problem didn't lie outside, they lay inside.

If the nature of reality is one way, but what you want out of it is something else entirely, maybe you've got to reassess your wants. What can you do about them? Some people say: "Well, the choice is simply between following your desires, or totally denying your desires for true happiness." But the Buddha was able to find a third way out, which was, on the one hand, looking at the nature of reality, the fact that it's governed by cause and effect, and, on the other hand, asking how far you can push those laws of cause and effect. Can you work with them in such a way that they open up to a true happiness? That was the happiness he pursued, and that's how he pursued it. That's how he came up with the answers that he found for the

larger issues, seeing his life in the perspective of those larger issues and then finding a realistic solution.

What's interesting about his life story is that he didn't look solely at his own problems in life, he looked at life in general. Looking at aging people, ill people, dead people, he realized that he himself was subject to the same fate. He was going to get old, he was going to grow ill, and he was going to die. If he had disdain for people like that, it wasn't appropriate. And if he was pursuing a happiness that was headed in the direction of what would age, grow ill, and die, that, too, wasn't appropriate.

The feeling that overcomes you when you think about these things is samvega. It's different from grief. Grief is personal. Samvega is impersonal, universal. And it's interesting that in his later teachings, when the Buddha talks about overcoming grief, the way out of grief is through samvega. You look at the happiness that you gain out of the objects of the senses—and that includes people and relationships—and you see the grief that comes when the happiness you had from these things changes. So instead of trying to turn from that grief by looking for pleasure in the senses, which is what most people do—they think that's the only alternative—you let yourself think about the universality of all this. That's what allows you to turn yourself, turn your thoughts, in another direction: What is it in the mind that keeps giving rise to this spark that desires birth? The Buddha said that that's the cause of suffering: this drive for becoming.

I was talking this evening to someone about the Buddha's take on happiness: Normal happiness is based on feeding. This person was saying that the solution would be to have lots of different food sources, so that if one food source is denied, you have lots of others to fall back on. But that's really blind. There comes a point where all of those other food sources run out, too. What do you do then?

This is why the Buddha's solution is to look for happiness that doesn't depend on food sources. Of course, by "food" we're talking about more than just physical food. We're also talking about emotional food, the food of sensory contact, the food of our thoughts, the food of consciousness. All these things can dry up, they can all be threatened. You have to look for a happiness that lies outside of their range. It was the Buddha's discovery that there is such a happiness, and it can be attained through human effort.

That's what takes you beyond samvega, and on to a quality called pasada, which means confidence, a sense of inspiration in the path. And this traversal from individual grief, through samvega, to confidence, is a necessary part of the path as well. It's the emotional side of the path. It's what gives impetus to the practice. Without it, the practice simply becomes a means of stress control, stress management, stress reduction. You dabble in it enough to calm yourself down and relax a little bit, and then go back to your old ways. Which is not a solution. It's just a Band-Aid. Often the Theravada path sounds very intellectual. But there is this emotional component as well. When you face disappointment, when you face separation, when you face grief, this is the way out: learning how to reflect on the general principles, the universality of grief, of separation. That's what gives you the impetus to pursue the path with the ardency it requires.

Why the Breath

January 9, 2004

We watch the breath so we can watch the mind. The breath is like a mirror for the mind. When you look at the way you breathe, you can get a good sense of what's going on in the mind. If you get really familiar with the breath, you can begin to detect things that are happening in the mind that you otherwise might have missed. When there's greed, when there's anger, when there's delusion, they'll show up in the breath. You find, though, that not only does the breath reflect the mind, but you can also use the breath to have an effect on the mind as well. Say, when there's anger, you consciously change the rhythm of your breathing. That will have an effect on the mind. The principle of cause and effect goes both ways here. The mind has an effect on the breath; the breath can have an effect on the mind.

To get the most use out of that principle you have to be willing to spend a lot of time with the breath, to get to know it, to explore how the whole process of breathing happens in the body. There are times when you have to be gentle in the exploration. When you start surveying the body, you begin to notice whole parts that seem to have disappeared. Your shoulder may be gone, it seems, or part of your back, or a place down the hips. Our immediate reaction when we notice something like this is to barge right in and straighten things out. That's an area where you have to be very careful, and be very observant. The hip hasn't gone anywhere; the shoulder hasn't gone anywhere. It's there. It's just that on a subconscious level you've hooked them up with the rest of the body in a strange and indirect way.

You have to be very, very observant, and watch for a while to see exactly where things have hooked up, and where you might suggest a few new ways of hooking things up. Because if you just barge into those parts of the body, they close up even more. It's like someone who's used to being abused. When someone comes in to help them in an aggressive way, they just experience it as more abuse. So they close up. The trick is being patient, watching, nudging a little here, nudging a little there, seeing what works, seeing what doesn't work. And bit by bit as you get more familiar with the body, more

familiar with the breath, things will begin to settle down. Things will begin to connect up.

Be willing to get to know this one thing very well. There's an old Russian proverb, I understand, that talks about two different kinds of knowledge. There's the knowledge of the fox and the knowledge of the hedgehog. The fox knows a lot of things, but very superficially. The hedgehog knows only one thing, but it knows it through and through. What we're working on here as we meditate is hedgehog knowledge. You really want to know the breath.

Once you've got the breath, then you've got a really good position for observing the mind. Even in the course of exploring the breath, you learn a lot about the mind as well. You get a sense of how the mind focuses its awareness on things. Exactly what is awareness? How many layers are there? There's the focal point of awareness, and there's that background awareness that fills the whole body. It's there already, it's simply a matter of getting the focused awareness in touch with it, learning to settle in with it there with the background, and keep our awareness of that background open as much as we can. All too commonly when we focus on one thing, we try to close off as many other things as possible just to maintain that focus. That puts huge areas of our awareness in the shadows. Sometimes that's necessary and sometimes it's not. But to unlearn the habit, we have to be very persistent. Once you get a sense of the whole body, try to keep that as open as much as you can.

That's where the skill comes in. It's not some sort of mystic spaciousness where you get in touch with the Buddha-nature or anything like that. It's simply the background awareness. It's there. And there's the question of being consciously in touch with it, being consciously open with it, or not. When you're more in touch with the background, you begin to notice the point, or the focus of the mind: here, there, wherever it moves. You're less likely to get knocked off by changes in the focal point. If your concentration is totally limited to one focal point, then as soon as anything disturbs it at all, then you're gone. You've lost the concentration. But if your concentration encompasses that background, then even though there may be a little bit of wavering in the focal point, you've still got the background in place. Your foundation is still there.

So stay here with the breathing. Be observant, be patient, because the processes of getting to know the breath, getting to know the mind, are long-

term processes. We've lived so much of our lives in ignorance of our own mind, in ignorance of our own breath, so it's going to take a while to really get to know them.

Each time you meditate, open your mind to the possibility that you may learn something new, because there's always something new here to notice. Even though it seems to be familiar territory, there are lots of details to explore. It's in focusing on the details, getting to know them, that you can learn a lot.

This is a common theme throughout the teachings: Simple things we do every day are the things we should study, because everything we need to know is right there. The whole question of intention and attention, the Buddha points out, is lying at the basis of so much of our suffering. It's right here in our actions. What things do we attend to? How do we look at things, and then how do we make up our minds to do things? And when we make up our minds to do things, what's the motivating factor?

You dig down not too deep, and you find that it's a quest for happiness. We do things because we think we'll be happier by doing them. Yet psychologists have shown that people are amazingly ignorant about what's going to give them happiness and what's not. They fixate on things they've done many, many times before, and they know it's not all that satisfying a happiness, but they still do them again and again anyhow. They do this partly because of the familiarity—they feel better doing something they're familiar with—and partly because they haven't really examined what they're doing, and what the results are, and how they might be improved.

We've talked many times about the Buddha's instructions to his son Rahula: Before you do something, look at your intention and ask yourself: "Is this something that will lead to happiness—either for yourself, or other people—or is it going to cause pain?" If it's going to cause pain and suffering, then don't do it. Act only on the intentions that aim for happiness and for well-being. Then while you're doing the action, check the results. Some results come immediately. You stick your hand in a fire, you know immediately that it's hot, and you pull it out. So if you see that the action is having some unintended results that are actually causing suffering, then you drop the action, you stop. If you see no harm or suffering, you keep continuing with it. Then, when you're done, you check the long-term results.

If the action ended up causing harm, resolve not to repeat it. If it didn't cause any harm, take joy and continue on the path.

What's interesting is what the Buddha says that at the end of this. When you reflect on your thoughts, your words, and your deeds in this way, this is how you purify your thoughts, words, and deeds. We very rarely think of purity as being tied up to the quest for happiness. But as the Buddha said, that's where you find purity, in really getting perceptive and intelligent about how you look for happiness, observing how you're looking for happiness, and being careful to make sure that your actions are in line with your most skillful intentions.

So the quest for happiness is not a bad thing. I was talking yesterday with someone who said after her academic career being trained as a psychologist, she never took the issue of happiness all that seriously. It seemed like something that would come or go pretty randomly. She was amazed to discover that the Buddha had devoted a whole body of teaching just to that one issue: the quest for happiness and treating it as a skill. But when you come right down to it, what else is there? If we're not conscious about our quest for happiness, it goes underground, and then we don't know what we're doing.

The Buddha says to bring it up into the open. Even when you're just breathing, notice that when you start focusing on the breath, there's a natural tendency to want the breath to be comfortable. Well, follow the tendency. Don't fight it. Don't push it underground. Look at your actions in every aspect of your life to see whether the happiness you're looking for is actually being produced by what you do. Often we repeat our unskillful actions, not because they don't produce any happiness at all, but they give us a little bit, and we focus only on that little bit. We ignore the larger suffering we're causing.

You want to look to see both where the gratification is and where the drawbacks of those actions are. Once you really see both sides, then you can compare them: Are the drawbacks worth it? Is the gratification worth the pain of the drawbacks? Once you're clear and aboveboard with yourself about both sides, then you can start looking for the way out, for the escape.

The Buddha says that insight basically comes down to five things: The first two are seeing things as they're originated by causes and seeing them pass away. This refers not just to experiences arising and passing away

independent of your decisions, like the things happening on a TV screen. It also refers to the decisions you make, the intentions you have. They're originated by causes and they pass away. That's the really interesting arising and passing away. You watch things arise and pass away, and then you look for three other things: the gratification they give, their drawbacks, and then the escape from falling for the gratification.

That's complete knowledge, the kind of knowledge we're working on here. Give the mind a good solid basis so you can watch things come and go, watch as intentions come and go. When the mind decides to act, see what happens as the action is taking place, and then when the action is done, does it totally go? Or does it leave a trace? What gratification do you get out of the action? What are the drawbacks of the action? When you compare the gratification to the drawbacks, what kind of balance do you get? And if it's not worth it, what are you going to do to gain release from it? In other words, if it's an action that really isn't all that helpful, if the gratification isn't worth it, what are you going to do to stop? What other things are you going to do in its place to find happiness instead?

The Buddha doesn't tell us to give up our search for happiness. He tells us to become more intelligent in how we go about it, more observant. What's amazing is that through this process we ultimately purify our thoughts, words, and deeds. We purify our mind. That's important, because our big ignorance lies right here, in what we're doing to try to gain happiness, how it's falling short, and how we don't admit it to ourselves: All these things.

So look here, bring the light of your awareness to this issue right here. By focusing on the breath, we put ourselves in the right place to watch, because taking the breath as our foundation gives us a place where we can step outside our thought processes—to watch them, as the Buddha says, as something separate. We watch them and see what happens as a result. And when we're at the breath, we're at the point where the mind and the body meet: the ideal position to watch mental actions, physical actions, and verbal actions, all at the same time, from this one standpoint.

There are lots of good reasons to stay with the breath. Keep reminding yourself about that. This gives rise to the quality that's called chanda, desire, one of the bases for success in the meditation.

It also gives rise to understanding. Often we focus on the breath, and after we've been at it a while, we tend to forget why we're doing it. Keep

reminding yourself that you're here to maintain the mind in the right spot to understand itself. That thought gives you both the motivation you need to stick with the practice, and the perspective you need to make sure that your practice stays on course.

Why Mindfulness

August 13, 2010

You may have noticed that there are many definitions of what mindfulness means: acceptance, non-reactive awareness, a wide-open awareness. In fact, the definitions are so many that one writer has said that mindfulness is a very mysterious quality, one quality that perform so many different functions for the mind.

But it wasn't the nature of the Buddha to deal in mysteries. For him, the definition of mindfulness was very simple: the ability to keep something in mind, to hold something in your memory. Then the question is: Why is it important to develop that quality? Why do you need to develop this ability to keep something in mind?

The answer is suggested by someone who actually had a different definition of mindfulness. This one teacher defined mindfulness as bare awareness of the present moment, and went on to say that mindfulness isn't hard, it's remembering to be mindful that's hard. But that's the point right there: We tend to forget what we're doing as we're meditating.

We're here to train the mind, to understand how the mind creates suffering for itself, and how it can learn not to create suffering. Yet all of a sudden, we find ourselves running restaurant reviews through the mind, planning for tomorrow. Memories of childhood come through and you say, "Boy, I haven't thought of that in a long time. Let's look into that." Five minutes later you wonder, "Wait a minute, I'm supposed to be here meditating. What am I doing?"

The ability to step back and watch the mind in action is central to the path, yet that's what we keep forgetting to do. We tend to plunge into our thoughts. The Buddha said that he got on the right path to practice when he realized that his thoughts were of two types: thoughts that lead to suffering and thoughts that lead away from suffering—in other words, thoughts that were unskillful and thoughts that were more skillful. So he decided to step back and look at these two types of thoughts to see what quality of mind was motivating each thought. If there was sensual desire, ill will, or a thought of

cruelty, he knew that that kind of thinking was going to be unskillful, and he'd have to hold it in check. If the thoughts were devoid of those qualities, then they were okay, and he could allow the mind to think in those directions.

So, what we have to remember to do is to step back so that we can see: "Where is this particular thought coming from? Where is it leading? Is it something I want to jump into? Or is it something I have to hold in check?" This means that you can't really jump into any of your thoughts. You have to watch them as a cause-and-effect process, so that you can see how they're skillful, how they're not, where they're coming from, where they're going. If you're in the thought, you can't see these things. Or if you're reacting to a thought in a way that says, "I don't like this thinking," "I'm ashamed of myself to be thinking this," "I'm going to put it into denial, I'm not really thinking this thought," or "Maybe it's not so bad after all," then you've left the training.

After all, we are in training here. Even though there may be a pleasure in following some of the thoughts, you have to remind yourself that it's a pleasure you have to forgo for the time being because you really want to understand why the mind causes suffering. If you don't step back and look at the mind's thinking processes, you're never going to solve this problem. So in the same way that an athlete has to forgo certain pleasures while he or she is in training, we have to forgo the pleasure of plunging into our thoughts and riding them off into who knows where.

Notice also, though, when the Buddha said he was able to look at his thought processes, he didn't just leave them there. If a thought was going to be unskillful, he had to hold it in check.

This is where right effort comes into the practice. I read recently where someone was saying that right effort and right mindfulness are two radically different practices. But then the question is, well, why did the Buddha put them together in one path? Didn't he say that right effort led to right mindfulness, and that right mindfulness helped right effort? They're supposed to work together. Remember the Buddha's image of mindfulness as a gatekeeper for a large fortress. He has to be very careful who he is letting in and who he's not letting him in. The gatekeeper has to be able to recognize who are the enemies, who are the friends, to keep out the enemies

and let in the friends. If any enemies get past the gatekeeper, the soldiers have to deal with them and get rid of them.

In the same way, once you recognize that a particular line of thinking is unskillful, you've got to remember how to undercut it, to go back through the causal process and find where in the mind you can actually cut off that kind of thinking and not get pulled into it. You have to understand: Where is the gratification in that thinking? What are you getting out of it as you think it? When you can develop a sense of dispassion for that gratification, that's when you will be able to let go of it.

There's a passage in the Canon where some monks are going to go abroad to one of the outlying districts in India. Before they go, they say goodbye to Ven. Sariputta. Sariputta says, "There are going to be intelligent people there. They're going to ask you, 'What does your teacher teach?' How are you going to answer them?" So the monks ask Sariputta, well, what would be a good answer? Sariputta's answer is interesting: "Our teacher teaches the abandoning of passion and desire." And the follow-up question is: "Passion and desire for what?" For the five aggregates: form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and sensory consciousness. There's another follow-up question: "What danger does your teacher see in having desire and passion for those things?" The answer: When you have desire and passion for those things, you do things that cause suffering. But if you abandon that passion and desire, you put an end to suffering.

So notice that Sariputta's answers here all have to do with activities, the actions you do. The Buddha recommends doing something. He didn't say: "Our teacher teaches four noble truths," or "Our teacher teaches emptiness, or not-self." Instead, he says, "Our teacher teaches how to undo these activities that cause suffering, how to abandon them."

That's what we're working on. The mind is constantly active. It's shaping its experiences. It's not a blank slate that's simply receiving impressions from outside. It's actually trying to make sense of things, trying to figure out some way of manipulating experiences, so that you can get pleasure, happiness out of them. So you want to look at the ways it's doing this that are actually leading in the other direction, that are actually causing suffering.

All this means that you have to learn how to watch the mind. Step back from it. The reason we develop concentration is that it gives the mind a good

place to stand and stay so that we can watch these things. You stay with the breath because it gets you out of your thought-worlds and into the physical sense of breathing. Not only that, you can work with the breath so that it becomes a good, comfortable place to stay. It gives you a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, so that you don't have to go for the gratification that comes from pursuing your thought worlds. You're not hungry all the time.

We work with the breath to create a pleasant place for the mind to stay, and at the same time, in working with the breath, we begin to get an insight into how we're shaping our experience, and how to do it well. We develop our sensitivities, our powers of judgment, so that we can become more clearly aware of where we're causing suffering, why we're doing it, and how we can learn not to do it.

So to stay with this training, you have to develop your powers of mindfulness, the ability to keep reminding yourself that you're here to learn about the mind, this producer of happiness and pain, to see why every time it does something, it wants happiness out of its actions, but many times it gets the opposite result. Why is this happening? What does it not understand? If you forget yourself, forget why you're here, you suddenly find yourself going back into your old habits. And you miss the opportunity to get some really good training.

It's often the case that the mind has the ability to block things out from itself, when it's about to do something that part of it knows is unskillful but another part of it wants to do. We set up these walls in the mind, these walls of forgetfulness, and they're precisely what we're trying to bore through so that we can see the connection between an action and its result, and the connection between the thought and the motivation for the thought. As we step back onto our foundation of the breath, we can develop the dispassion that enables us to let go of all the different causes of stress and suffering in the mind.

So this is why we need to develop mindfulness and why this quality of keeping something in mind is such an important part of the path. If you find yourself tempted to go jumping into your plans for tomorrow, remind yourself: You've planned many, many tomorrows without really noticing what you're doing. Isn't it time you stepped back and gained a sense of what's going on? What is this process? It's only when you step back that, as the Buddha said, you begin to see things you never saw before, realize

things you've never realized before, and taste a freedom you've never tasted before. That's the potential of the practice—and that, too, is something you want to keep in mind.

Concentration Nurtured with Virtue

July 23, 2009

The Buddha once said that concentration, when nurtured by virtue, has great fruit, great reward. Now, he wasn't saying that you can't do concentration without virtue. There are many examples around of people who have very strong powers of concentration but very little virtue at all. What he was saying is that if you want your concentration to yield great fruit—in terms of bringing about the discernment that leads to release—it has to be done in the context of life where you're trying to be virtuous in your actions, taking your actions and your words seriously, and also taking seriously their impact both on yourself and on others.

This sensitivity to your actions and their results is what helps to bring your concentration to the state where it can lead to great fruit. If you go through life not really being careful about what you do, or not being sensitive to the impact of your actions, it's going to be very hard for you to be very careful about your meditation, and to be sensitive to cause and effect as they happen in the mind. Because virtue is largely the practice of applying mindfulness and alertness to your actions: You have to keep your precepts in mind, and you have to be alert to what you're actually doing.

One of Ajaan Fuang's students who practiced meditation with him for quite a while in Bangkok decided to come out to the monastery in Rayong to observe the eight precepts for a week. So she took the eight precepts and that afternoon as she was walking past one of the guava trees, she noticed how the guavas were ripe, just waiting to be picked. So she picked one and took a bite. Ajaan Fuang happened to be a little ways off and said: "Hey, what's that in your mouth? I thought you were going to take the eight precepts." She realized she had totally forgotten about her precepts. So he consoled her by saying: "What's really important is that you observe one precept, and that's the precept of the mind." After all, the mind is what's in charge of your actions. If you stay mindful of your intentions, it's going to cover your words and your deeds.

But words and deeds deal in particulars, so you have to pay attention to the particulars as well. For example, if you've taken the precept against killing, how are you going to deal with ants? How are you going to deal with termites? This forces you to think like an ant, think like a termite. When they come into your house, why do they come? Where do they come from? What ways can you deal with them without killing them? This moves from being simply mindful and alert to developing discernment and empathy. You learn to empathize with the ants, empathize with the termites. They're looking for food, they're looking for water, just like you. You have to learn how to put your mind in their mind if you're going to learn how to deal with them. Discernment and empathy are good qualities to provide a foundation for your concentration.

There will come times when you come up against really difficult issues that are not easy to solve. That's to remind you, of course, that living in this world it's hard not to harm beings, even if you don't intend to. And this is not just a matter of the awkwardness of having taken the precepts. It's the simple fact of your being born into this world with needs. You need food, you need clothing, you need shelter, you need medicine: These things involve suffering one way or another, not only for yourself in trying to get these things, but also for other people, other beings, that are involved in one way or another in the production chain. That thought is meant to give rise to a sense of samvega. If you want to be totally harmless, you have to get out, you have to stop participating in this process of samsara.

So as you observe the precepts, you're developing a lot of good qualities in the mind that are helpful in meditation. You see the harm that comes simply from the fact that you're alive, and you try to minimize that harm by minimizing the harmful intentions in your mind. You realize that the training of the mind, and only the training of the mind, is what'll get you out of the mess of this addiction.

It may sound selfish that you want to get out and leave everybody else behind, but that's not the right way to think about these issues. Samsara, the wandering on, is a process, an activity, an addiction, and so the best way to deal with an addiction, and the kindest way to deal with other people who are addicted, is for you to learn how to overcome your own addiction. Then, once you've done that, if you can help, you can help other people overcome theirs. It's not as if you're leaving them in a lurch. At the very least, you're

giving them a good example that overcoming the addiction is something that can be done.

It's in this way that virtue provides the right context for concentration, a context of mindfulness and alertness, empathy, goodwill, compassion, a sensitivity to cause and effect—and in particular, a sensitivity to the impact you have on others.

This part is very important because this is one of the main areas where we tend to be very deluded and in a lot of denial. We don't like to think that we harm other beings, or that our actions have actually harmed anybody in any way that really counts. So we find ways of discounting other beings in cases where we suspect that some harm has been done. We say, "Oh it really doesn't matter, those people don't matter, those beings don't matter," or whatever. Or, "My intentions were good and so my good intentions should count for everything." They count for something, but not everything. When the Buddha has you look at your actions, he has you look at both your intentions and at the results. It's not a matter of either/or. It's both/and. We do this so that we can learn. It's not that we're trying to pass a final judgment on ourselves or our actions. We want to see where our actions harm others, and what we can do the next time around not to harm them.

When you think of this process of judging and evaluating your actions in this way—that you're judging a work in progress—then it's a lot easier to be open and honest with yourself about your actions and their results. You're not pretending that you're totally pure, totally perfect. I've met a couple of monks who are very proud of the fact that their precepts have been perfect. But you actually look at their behavior, and what they've done is to redefine the precepts to suit their behavior. So once an element of pride comes into the practice, it starts distorting things. You always want to have the attitude that "I'm willing to learn; if I can find a better way to do things, I want to find it."

The quality of ingenuity is also an important part of providing the right framework for your concentration. As Ajaan Lee once said, the ways of the mind are more than many, and certainly more than you can put in a book or simple meditation instructions. Which means that, with a lot of the practice, you've got to come up with your own instructions. You take the basic principles and you learn how to apply them. If applying them one way

doesn't work, you turn around and apply them in another way. Or find another strategy for applying them. You've got to use your own ingenuity.

There's ingenuity required in trying to keep your precepts even when circumstances are difficult. For instance, when someone has asked you a question, and you know that if you tell them the full truth about the answer, it's going to harm them—giving rise to greed, anger, or delusion—then you've got to be ingenious about changing the topic or giving a partial answer without lying. Taking the precepts requires you to be ingenious, to plan ahead of time, knowing sometimes that someone is going to ask a particular question and preparing yourself so that you don't have to suddenly think up the answer at the last minute. This is called making the effort to prevent unskillful qualities from arising, part of right effort, which in turn is a prerequisite for right concentration.

So the practice of virtue, if you take it seriously and do it skillfully, develops a lot of discernment. It requires discernment. Ajaan Lee makes the point that people sometimes practice virtue to help their concentration, and practice concentration to help their discernment, but they don't think about turning around and using their discernment to help with their virtue and concentration, which is why their practice doesn't go very far.

But if you realize that you have to bring discernment to the way you observe the precepts, bring discernment to the way you practice concentration, then all three aspects of the triple training help one another. Concentration, when nurtured by virtue, bears fruit in discernment. Discernment, when nurtured by concentration, bears fruit in release. That's the standard pattern. But the pattern that you discover in practice is that you've also got to use your concentration to work on your virtue and your discernment, and your discernment to work on your concentration and virtue.

So it's good to stop and think for a while about virtue, and how it actually applies to the training of the mind. Don't simply go through the motions of observing the precepts, or resent the precepts when they get difficult. Think of them as providing you with food for thought, food for contemplation, about the nature of what it is to be a human being, the nature of action, the qualities of your intentions. Are your good intentions really skillful intentions? There's a difference, you know. Good intentions can have delusion, whereas skillful intentions don't. That's the distinction.

So we use the precepts for training purposes. It's not that we simply just hold on to them, hoping that by following the precepts we'll be good little boys and good little girls and will get a reward. That's called clinging to habits and practices. It's a fetter. But if you see them as an opportunity to develop discernment and then apply your discernment to them, they become useful tools in the path.

It's not the case that once you've reached the level of stream entry you don't need the precepts anymore, in letting go of that fetter of groping at habits and practices. Actually, at that point, your precepts become really solid, because the mind has reached a state where it's always clear about its intentions, and so it's always going to act on skillful intentions. It's no longer groping because it understands exactly how the precepts function: They don't guarantee your awakening, but they do give you food for thought, they do train the mind in the qualities of mindfulness, alertness, ingenuity, discernment, compassion, and empathy. In a sense, they soften the mind so that you recognize a mistake when it happens. You're not stubborn. You don't put up walls of resistance and denial. That makes the mind a lot more sensitive to what it's doing and the results of what it's doing. That sensitivity encourages the desire to do these things as skillfully as possible.

When you have these qualities and bring them to your concentration, it's a lot easier to work through the problems that come up, and it's a lot easier to be sensitive to what's going on in the mind, so that your concentration will yield the discernment that really does lead to release.

Concentration & Insight

May, 2001

We like to make a sharp distinction between concentration practice and insight practice, but they really have to go together. Concentration doesn't automatically give rise to insight. Insight doesn't automatically give rise to concentration. But for them to develop, they need to work together. Some people find that one develops more naturally than the other. But the idea is to get them in balance. Now, balance doesn't mean a constantly static equilibrium. Sometimes you're going to lean a little bit more to the left, sometimes you're going to lean a little bit more to the right, like one of those old-fashioned scales for weighing things. But if the two qualities work together, you find that they help each other along.

For instance, it takes a certain amount of insight for you to get the mind concentrated. You have to understand what kinds of thoughts are going to get in the way, what ways you have of dealing with them, what tools you can bring, so that you can be prepared when the mind doesn't settle down easily.

There are various tactics for fending off distraction and for finding something the mind likes. We were talking earlier today about the carrot and the stick. The carrot is a nice comfortable feeling you can develop with the breath. If you work with it, if you explore it, you find that the breath can be really, really comfortable. Sometimes it gets so good that you get absorbed in the breathing and you can't imagine why you would need anything else to make yourself happy—it just feels so good. That's the carrot.

The problem is the mind doesn't always settle down in a very nice and cooperative way. So you need the stick—in other words, remembering that there are problems in the mind, dangers in the mind, and that you're going to need to keep your tools at hand to fend them off.

There's a list of five ways of dealing with distracting thoughts, but it's a short checklist for covering a whole variety of approaches. The first approach is that you just replace the distracting thought with a better thought. Give the mind something better to think about than that thought—

like the breath. Just bring the mind back to the breath and try to make it as comfortable as possible.

The second approach is to reason with yourself. In other words, if a thought is really sticky and the mind keeps returning to it, you've got to point out the drawbacks of that particular kind of thinking until the mind is ready to let it go. You take the drawbacks to heart to the point where you can tell yourself, "I don't really want to go there." The mind drops the thought and goes back to the breath.

The third approach is that you consciously ignore that thought. In other words, you know it's there, but you're just not going to pay it any attention. It's like something in the background. You keep the breath in the foreground and just make sure you don't get involved in that other thought. You don't pay attention to it, because by paying attention to it you're feeding it. So you focus all your attention on the breath.

The fourth approach for dealing with distraction is that once you get really sensitive to how the breath energy flows into the different parts of the body, you can see that a particular thought is associated with a pattern of tension someplace in the body. It might be around the eyes, or in the arms—any part of the body. When you can locate the tension that goes along with the thought, you relax it, and the thought will go away.

The fifth way to deal with thoughts, when none of these four methods get results, is to consciously press the tongue against the roof of the mouth, sort of squeeze the thought out, telling yourself you're not going to think about it, you're just going to force it out. If we were going to compare this list with a toolbox, this is the sledgehammer in the toolbox. It works as long as your willpower holds out, and sometimes that's all you need, just a little breathing space, or a little calm space in the mind—not necessarily calm, but forcibly still and not distracted. Then you can relax and let up a little bit, and go back to the breath. Maybe by that time one of the other methods will kick in and help you along.

So you've got to be alert to the fact that even when the mind is beginning to settle down, something else can come in. So while part of you is settling down, another part of you has to keep watch. Once you find that the settled part really is solidly settled, then the watchful, wary part can be relaxed a little bit, and you can focus more and more attention on the breath itself. Allow the mind to enter into the breath as fully as possible. As long as you're

alert and mindful, there's no such thing as too much concentration, too much stillness. It's when the stillness blots out the mind from its alertness, that's where you have to pull back. But as long as you're very clear about where you are, where you're focused, allow the mind just to burrow on into the breath, to burrow on into the present moment, letting go of anything that might smack of either the moment just passed or the next moment coming up. Totally give yourself to the breath right here, right now. Allow the mind to rest in that way, to gain strength in that way, so that when it comes out it's ready for work.

The work here is the insight. Sometimes the coming out is total—you come back to ordinary consciousness—but other times it's not. You step back a little bit, not so far that you've destroyed the concentration, but far enough so that you can see what's going on, and then you just watch, pose a question in the mind.

The best questions have to do with the four noble truths—where is there any stress or suffering right here?—although there are other useful ones as well. Say you sense that there's greed, anger, or delusion lurking around in the mind. The Buddha says if you really want to understand them to the point of getting past them, you have to understand not only their drawbacks but also their allure. Why is it that that particular state of mind is so attractive? Why are you willing to play along with it?

We mentioned earlier that there's a point when a world of becoming suddenly appears in the mind, and you have the choice of whether to go with it or not. To go along with it is like playing make-believe. Why are you willing to play make-believe in that way? What pulls you in? Boredom? What's the gratification that comes from these things? You have to look for that as well. When you see that there's really not much, and when you put things in the scales and weigh the gratification against the drawbacks, you'll find the drawbacks are always a lot greater. But if you pretend that there's no allure at all, after a while the mind will begin to realize that it's lying to itself and then it revolts. So you've got to be fair: There is allure, but there are also drawbacks. Which is greater? Be honest with yourself.

The big drawback is the stress and suffering caused by these thoughts. The Buddha's use of the word dukkha covers both suffering and stress, because there is stress even in the states of concentration, and that is what you'll have to focus on to get past the concentration. But first you want to

focus on the grosser forms of suffering. This is how insight develops: You start working at things that are really obvious. It's amazing how we're not willing to focus on things that are really obvious. People want to skip to the more advanced levels.

I was reading recently about a conference they're going to be giving in New York next month, and there's going to be a discussion panel on renunciation. Now, are they going to be discussing renouncing sensual pleasures? No, they're going to talk about ego renunciation. They're going to jump over the obvious and go for the subtle. Of course, what happens is that the obvious stuff never gets dealt with, and the subtle stuff doesn't really get changed, either. You have to focus on the obvious things first: the greed, the lust, the anger, the fear. Work with those. Even though you may not be able to uproot them, at least you can start chipping them down to size, bit by bit by bit.

If you don't exercise your discernment in this way, how will it ever get strong? It's like a muscle. If your muscle is weak, how do you make it strong? You use the weak muscle you've got. In the beginning you can't lift the really heavy weights, but don't get discouraged. Realize that as you keep lifting slightly heavier and heavier and heavier things, the muscle builds up. It gets stronger and stronger. The same with your discernment: You start out with the blatant stuff, deal with that, and then start working into the subtler issues as your discernment gets more precise and clear.

Now, as you're working on these questions about where's the stress here, or what else is going on in the mind that's creating stress, sometimes you find that as you follow these questions along, things get clear. You begin to understand things. Other times, though, the mind isn't up to that line of questioning yet. Things start getting confused. When that happens, you pull back into concentration.

The comparison Ajaan Lee makes is with walking: You lean a little bit to the left on the left foot, then you lean a little bit to the right on the right foot. It's by shifting your weight from right to left, left to right, right to left, that you can walk along. And so it is in the meditation: You're practicing with one object here—the breath—but sometimes you lean a little bit more toward getting absorbed in just the stillness of the mind with the breath, and other times you lean a little bit more to the questions about stress.

The ideal practice is when neither side is too far from the other. In other words, the questioning stays in the present moment, doesn't leave the present moment. At the same time, your concentration doesn't lose its mindfulness and alertness and go off into a dead blank. As the two help each other along, as the Buddha said, those who have both discernment and jhana are the ones who are in the presence of awakening.

So it's a question of gaining your own intuitive sense of when the mind needs some rest and when it needs to ask questions. Also, try to get an intuitive sense of which questions are getting results and which ones are not. If there are questions related to the four noble truths, okay, you're on the right track: Where's the stress here? Sometimes you sit very quiet for a long time and you don't see any stress at all. It's a sign that you're not sensitive enough. So you try to make things more quiet. It's like tuning in on a radio station. If there's static, you can't hear the signal clearly, so you try to get tuned in more and more and more precisely to the wavelength where there's no static at all. Then the signal is very clear. In the same way, the greater the stillness in the mind, the easier it is to notice movement, to notice stress, to notice disturbance when it happens. You've got a standard against which to measure things.

So as we're focusing in on the breath, we're developing both tranquility and insight. The two help each other along. And the skill that comes into the meditation is getting that intuitive sense I mentioned just now: When do you need more rest? When do you need to ask more questions? When the questions hit a dead end, it's time to go back and get some more rest. When the stillness in the mind has had enough, you can go back to questioning. The skill lies in getting a sense of these things.

That kind of sense can't be measured so that one person can tell another person, now is the time to stop in place, now is the time to go on to something else. You have to use your own powers of observation to learn how to walk properly, so that you don't tip over to the left, don't tip over to the right, or turn around and walk back. It's like gaining a sense of balance: Nobody else can gain your balance for you. You've got to learn how to govern your own mind.

In Shape to Meditate

February 4, 2012

When Ajaan Suwat was here, he would often begin his instructions by saying: Get your mind in shape to meditate. What do you do to get it in shape? Think about why you're here. Are you here for the sake of true happiness? And think about where your mind is right now. Is it leaning in the direction of too much energy or too little energy? Is it preoccupied with pleasant things or unpleasant things? Do you have a clear idea of where you've been in your meditation? Where you would like to go? These are all things you want to think about as you get ready to meditate.

That reflection on true happiness serves warning to any thought that doesn't relate to true happiness: It doesn't have any place right here right now. But you may have some issues that are covered with Velcro, very difficult to put aside, in which case you may have to do a little preliminary cutting away, shaving off all those little Velcro hooks. If you have thoughts involved with relationships, remind yourself that no relationship can provide you with true happiness. To expect true happiness out of a relationship is to place too much weight on the relationship, more than it can bear. If you're preoccupied with something that happened earlier today, remind yourself that you can't go back and change it. No matter how much you rerun it through your mind, it's not going to bring back the past. So let that go.

As for the future, it hasn't come yet, and you don't really know what's going to happen. But you do know that you'll have to be prepared for anything. Qualities like mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment: These are all good things to have when the unexpected happens. So rather than plan specific strategies for how you're going to deal with this, deal with that, remind yourself that often you have to think up and adjust your strategies in line with the situation, and that's best done if you're really alert and can keep the mind really calm.

And that's what you're working on here right now.

If you're feeling a little lazy, think of what's motivating you to meditate, and how you can give a little more oomph to that motivation. What thoughts will help? This is one of the reasons that we chant the recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha every evening before we meditate. We bow down to the Buddha because the Buddha represents the things that we want to value within ourselves. We think of his qualities, his compassion, his purity, his discernment: These are good things to have. The fact that there have been people on Earth who have developed them all the way to the end of suffering: That's something inspiring. That includes both the Buddha and the members of the noble Sangha.

Then there's the Dhamma that the Buddha found and taught. It's been passed down from generation to generation because it's a valuable, and here it comes to our generation. We've got the chance to make use of it or just to throw it away. Which would you prefer? That kind of thinking can give rise to more motivation to practice.

You can also think about the dangers of not practicing. Like that chant we had just now: The world is swept away, things change, it offers no shelter, there's suffering, there's nothing of our own in the world that we can really hold on to as any kind of protection. And then that reflection on craving: If we don't take care of our craving, we're just going to keep coming back to more and more and more of the same old changing, stressful world, but it constantly eludes our grasp. Which means we've got to work on the mind.

It's helpful to get the mind in shape like this so that you're more prepared to settle down. When you've settled down, when anything else comes up, you can remember: Okay, we're here to meditate, we're here to develop concentration, we're not here to be thinking about tomorrow's shopping list or going over what someone said today. One of the important skills as a meditator is to learn how to step out of your thoughts, because all too often we jump right in. For many of us every thought that comes is like a little present wrapped up in wrapping paper with the bows: "Oh what's this?" You want to go inside and see what's in there, and it just sucks you right in.

So, for the time being, just let all those little presents stay scattered around. You know what many of them are all about anyhow. It's a pretend

game that we play, pretending that we don't know even when we really do. You don't have to play the game. And it's not the case that a thought coming up right now is going to come just this one time. This is not your only chance to deal with that really wonderful thought. It'll come back.

What you need now is another set of skills, the skills of wisdom, compassion, and purity that the Buddha exemplified. Those are the things you want to work on right now. So very few of any of your thoughts are in any way related to those qualities, so the wise thing right now is to learn how to step back, be an adult about your thinking, and realize that you want to work on some qualities of mind rather than specific thoughts.

The qualities here are mindfulness, alertness, those things that undergird the development of discernment. Keep the breath in mind and be alert to it as it comes in, as it goes out. Be alert to how well your mind relates to it, how you can change the way you breathe. How can you change the way you think about your breathing, so that it's easier to stay with? If you run into pains in the body, how do you work around them?

Sometimes you feel that it's asking a little bit too much to work around the pain. After all, it's invaded your space, what right does it have to be there? But the question always is, well, what right do you have to be there? You were the one who latched on. Nobody invited you. And you didn't really look at the fine print. You wanted a human life, well, here it is. So if there's a pain you have to work around, you work around it. Give the mind a space where it can feel at ease.

One of the signs of a true warrior is knowing where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are, and having a willingness to back off when you know you're not ready for a particular battle. In the meantime, you cultivate the qualities that will help when the time comes to go into battle, to really look into the pain, really look into your attachment to the pain, and all of the issues around it.

We mentioned earlier today that the big issue is the way the mind fabricates things, and you get to know how the mind fabricates things by fabricating good things first. We've been fabricating all kinds of ignorant things that lead to stress and suffering, so now let's fabricate something good: a state of concentration in the mind. Make way for the things that you can't change, and work on the things you can. In this way, you get more and

more sensitive to the way you shape your experience by the perceptions you hold in mind, by the way you think about things, the questions you ask.

You can ask questions about the breath: Where is it coming in right now? Not the air coming in and out the nose, but where does the feeling of energy come in and out of the body? In how many different directions? Do you have a sense that it's coming in from different directions? When these energies come into the body, are they working together? Or are they working at cross purposes? Look into that. That's something you might want to sort out as you're sitting here so that you can sit with a greater sense of ease and well-being. In other words, you learn how to use your directed thought and evaluation to bring the mind down into a state of stability. Analyze things in a way that leads towards a sense of well-being.

As you get better and better at this process of fabrication, as you're doing it with the more and more knowledge, that cuts through one of the really important links in dependent co-arising right there: from ignorance to fabrication. That's how things get started all the way down to suffering. But if you bring knowledge to the process, that can relieve a lot of suffering.

This is why the Buddha recommends that, when you're working with the breath, you're upfront about the fact that you are shaping things. You are working with intention. After all, the mind's not just a passive recipient of things. It's constantly going out and looking. This is a mind that's attached to a body that needs to feed, so it's used to looking for food, fixing food, deciding what's good food, and what's not good food. It's driven by feelings of hunger. So what we've got here is an active intelligence. We're not just sitting here watching things come and go. We're actively shaping our experience to figure out what to feed on, what we can lay claim to in order to feed on, and where we can look for our next meal. That's the kind of mind we have. That's the kind of mind we're training. So learn how to teach it how to feed on the breath, to find a sense of well-being right here.

As the Buddha says: Some of the best food for the mind is the sense of refreshment, fullness, and rapture that comes from concentration. What ways of breathing are refreshing? What ways of breathing give rise to a sense of fullness and maintain a sense of fullness in the body? All too often, we get full as we breathe in, and then squeeze things out as we breathe out. How do you maintain a sense of fullness as you breathe out, so that all the blood vessels are relaxed, and the blood is flowing everywhere in the body,

and there's no need to squeeze anything out? The energy goes out on its own. You maintain the sense of everything being full throughout all the energy channels of the body, and see what that does for the mind. What sense can you gain of fullness, of satisfaction, of being here in the present moment?

As you feed the mind good food like this, then when the thought of other food comes up, you're not all that interested. You've got something really good right here. There may be the force of habit when you go back to old things. But the more you learn how to appreciate the sense of fullness you have right here, the more you can use it to help let go of things that otherwise would just pull you in and make you suffer in the end.

So you're trying to fabricate something really good right here, with a sense of knowledge, as you're observant. In this way, you begin to understand fabrication, and how you do have some say in what you're experiencing right now. We're not totally passive, and also not totally subject to the results of past kamma. We have some choices. The more skilled we are, the more we can do with those choices.

It's like being a cook. A really skilled cook can go into a kitchen with just about anything, and come out with a really good dish to eat. Even if it's just scraps, sometimes you can make good food out of it if you're really skilled.

We have the Buddha as our example that these skills can be developed. As he once said, throughout his practice there was never a time when his mind was overcome by pain or overcome by pleasure. The person he was talking to said, "Maybe that's because you never really experienced any big pleasures or pains." The Buddha replied, oh no, lots of pain, but he learned how not to suffer from it. Lots of pleasure, but he learned how not to get carried away. These skills are possible.

So learn how to be good at fixing your meal, because it gives you energy on the path—at the same time teaching you some very important lessons about the mind, lessons that come in handy in learning how not to suffer, regardless of what the situation is. There's so much in the world that you can't control, it's good to find things that you can—and it's good to learn that the things that you can control, the qualities of your mind, your intentions, are the ones that make all the difference between suffering or not. They're the crucial ones, so give them a lot of attention.

Maintaining Goodwill

July 24, 2004

Start out with thoughts of goodwill. Tell yourself: "May I be happy. May my happiness be true." Those two words have to go together: "true" and "happiness." True happiness is the whole purpose of why we're meditating. We realize there's a lot of suffering in life, and a lot of that suffering comes from our own minds, yet we don't want it. We should respect our desire for happiness—in particular, our desire for true happiness, not just any old happiness. True happiness. That kind of happiness has to come from within.

Our desire for true happiness is the basis not only for our looking after ourselves, but for looking after other people as well, wishing for their happiness, too. Because after all, everybody else wishes for happiness, and if our happiness is going to depend on their suffering, then it's not going to last. They're going to do what they can to overturn it. So the extent to which your happiness depends on thoughts and words and deeds that deal with things outside, it has to take into consideration the happiness of other people. But true happiness has to come from within. It has to be based on something that doesn't change, and the only place you can find that is in the mind.

For most of us, that's just an idea. It's not definitely true yet, but it makes sense. You see things outside changing, so how are you going to depend on people who die, age, grow ill, people who are going to leave you? Or people who you will have to leave? Things that you'll have to leave? The one thing left is looking inside. Now, looking inside is discouraging at first because your mind seems to be a bigger mess than the things outside. But it can be sorted out: That's the lesson of the Buddha's life. The basic message of his quest is that your desire for true happiness is something that should be taken seriously, because it's something that can be fulfilled. It's what makes life meaningful—and it is possible. That's the message of his awakening.

This is why we start with thoughts of goodwill for ourselves, and then we spread those thoughts of goodwill out to other people: family, very close

friends, and then even wider, to people you like, to people you're neutral about, even to people you don't like. If everybody could find true happiness within, then this world would be a much better place. Spread thoughts of goodwill to people you don't even know—and not just people, living beings of all kinds. May all beings find true happiness.

With those thoughts, you clear the ground for the meditation, not only reminding yourself of the motivation for why you're meditating, but also clearing away a lot of the resentments you may be carrying around. It happens all too often that when the mind begins to settle down, difficult things start coming up. What someone said the other day, what you did the other day or the other week, sometimes years past: These things come up. So this is to prepare yourself. As soon as any of this stuff comes up, you can remind yourself: "Hey, I'm here for goodwill. I've already wished happiness for that person, wished happiness for myself, so why should I browbeat myself or stir myself up with issues that serve only to heat up the mind and make it uncomfortable?"

We've got important work to do here: working on the mind's habits that create suffering for itself and for other beings. The first step in this job is to learn how to make the mind quiet, so if there are any other disturbances, you just push them aside. Focus on the breath, because that's one thing you know is always going to be in the present moment. If you're watching your breath, you know you can't be watching a past breath or a future breath. Watching the breath right now, the mind will tend to hover around the present moment. It may not be precisely on top of nothing but the present moment, but it's close enough to the present moment that that's what counts right now.

You don't have to talk too much about the breath to yourself, just enough to remind yourself to stay with the breath. When it comes in, know it's coming in. When it goes out, know it's going out, and work with it a little bit to make it comfortable. Allow it to be comfortable. You don't have to force it in, force it out. Choose any one spot where it's easy to follow the breath—the tip of the nose, the lungs, the middle of the chest, the abdomen, any place where it's easy to keep track of "now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out," and it feels comfortable to be centered there. Then relax around that center. All too often, when we try to focus on one part of the body, we

tense up around it. Try to maintain your focus even as you relax around that spot. Try to maintain both that spot and the sense of relaxation around it.

That's all you have to do. It's not much, it's simply that the mind is not simple. It's got other issues, other agendas that keep popping in, and you have to be adept at fending them off. It's like that old story of the sword master. A student came and said he wanted to learn how to be a sword master, too. So the sword master said, "Okay, go out and chop some wood, and fix some food, and do this, do that," and had him do chores all around the monastery. But no mention of learning how to use a sword. The student was wondering, "When am I going to work with the sword?" The master said, "Don't worry. We'll get to it." Then, every now and then, the sword master would attack the student with the stick while the student was doing his chores. The student got very wary and very alert, until one day the sword master came up to hit him, and the student was ready for him, fended him off, and the sword master said, "Okay, now you've learned to be a sword master."

You've got to anticipate the fact that other things are going to come up unannounced at unexpected times, so armor yourself with the right attitude: that this little place of stillness here is really important and has to be protected. You're not going to trade it for anything else. Sometimes thoughts will come in and say, "Hey, you have to plan for tomorrow, this is a great time to plan for tomorrow, all this time, nothing else you've got to do right now. Or you can go and rehash a relationship with this person or that person"—all kinds of things you could be doing with the hour. You've got to remind yourself: That's a waste of the hour. The most important thing is to learn how to develop the skills you need in order to keep the mind still right here: mindfulness and alertness. Learn how to be very skeptical of the mind's claims when it says that this or that thought about the past or the future is really important, you've really got to think about it. You've got to learn how to see through those claims.

One of the reasons that we're so susceptible to advertising outside is that the mind uses all sorts of advertising tricks on itself, worming its way in and saying, "Oh, you really have to think about this, you know. This is really important." Or: "This is a really attractive." Or: "You're really going to enjoy this thought." Don't believe those claims.

Most of the thoughts that are going to come into the mind are old thoughts anyhow. They're old movies. You've seen them who knows how many times? Do you really need to see Humphrey Bogart say "Play it again," or whatever he said? Do you really need to see what happens at the end of this Hitchcock movie? You've seen them many times before. And truth be told, the thoughts in your mind are not nearly as interesting as a Hitchcock movie or Casablanca. If they were projected on the screen and you had to go into the theater and pay for them, you wouldn't go. You wouldn't pay for them. Yet it's so easy to drop the breath and go after these thoughts while we're sitting here meditating.

So remind yourself: You're not here for that. You've seen these movies before and they're lousy movies. Why bother with them again? As for plans for the future, you can save those for the end of the meditation, after the mind is clear and calm. If you really do need to think about something, okay, then you can think about it. But in the meantime, get your mind calmed down, get it clear, just stay right here with the breath, allow the breath to be comfortable, allow your focus around your breath to be comfortable. And then just maintain that. It's a healing awareness, like a topical cream. The longer you can keep at it, the more it's going to heal the mind.

So the trick in the meditation is, one, learning how to focus the mind and the breath in a way that feels comfortable, and then two, learning how to maintain focus.

Finally, three, there's learning how to use it. In other words, when you finally get settled here, you can start using this state of mind to open things up inside, to see all the tricks the mind plays on itself—and specifically the tricks it plays on itself when it's going to cause itself suffering. You'd think that the mind would be honest and sincere with itself, but it's not. It's worse than the Chicago City Council. It uses all kinds of tricks, all kinds of political maneuvers. This desire comes in, and it's almost as if it has a mind of its own. What actually happens is that you begin to identify with these things without really thinking about "Whose voice is this? What kind of voice is this? Where is it going to take me? Do I really want to go there?" To see where these thoughts are going, you have to be able to step back—which is precisely what the breath meditation is for. It gives you a firm place to take a stance and watch what's coming in and out of the mind, so that you can

understand why it is that the mind creates suffering for itself. It doesn't make any sense at all. And yet it keeps on doing this.

That's the best use for this concentration, because when you stop creating suffering for yourself, you don't feel inclined to create suffering for anybody else. The reason we make life miserable for other people is because we feel threatened, along with this attitude: "As long as I'm suffering, let everybody else suffer too." Or: "If I'm suffering, I don't have the strength to do the right thing to help other people, it's just beyond me." It's because you're burdening yourself down with tons of bricks. How can you lift up a brick for someone else? If you can learn to put down your burden, then it's no problem lifting up a whole load of bricks for other people.

This is the elegance of the Buddha's teachings: You focus on this one problem—the suffering you create for yourself—and you find that all other problems in your life get solved. Either you realize that they're not genuine problems anyhow, or else you see that they were caused by the fact that you weren't mindful, weren't alert. You were too busy creating suffering for yourself to really do the right thing. Once that old habit is gone, though, then you find it a lot easier to deal with whatever comes up. And there are no problems in the mind. The problems in the world stay in the world. You help where you can and you realize where you have to let go, but the world doesn't make inroads on the mind.

That's what we use the meditation for. As for the other issues that might sound more attractive or more compelling—Is the world one? Do we have one mind? Are we all a oneness together?—even if you tried to answer those questions, you wouldn't get anywhere. There are so many issues like that out there. "What is my true self? Do I exist? Is the world eternal? Is it not eternal?" With all these issues, the Buddha said, "Don't go there." He wasn't forbidding you to go there, he was just recommending that if you're really concerned about solving the problems in your life, don't bother with these issues, because they're false issues. The real issues are: Why is the mind creating suffering for itself? How can it stop? Once these issues are taken care of, everything is taken care of. That's what you use the meditation for.

But to get the best use out of the meditation, you have to be good at focusing the mind, and then maintaining that concentration. Because in the maintaining comes the steadiness that you're going to need in order to see things. When something moves in the mind, you don't have to move along

with it. When you can learn that skill, you've learned a very important one. All too often, something moves in the mind and we jump right in, as when a car goes riding past and we get intrigued: "Where is this car going? Well, let's go. Jump in it and go." And the driver usually ends up dumping us off someplace and we have to come back. Here comes another car, "Let's jump into this one." Every little movement of the mind, you move into it, move along with it. It's as if the mind is singing and you sing along with it. But when you learn the skill to stay still in the midst of the movements of the mind and the body, that's when you've learned something very, very important.

That's why you have to maintain your focus. If you stay with the breath for a little while and then move on to whatever comes up, that's your ordinary state of mind. It doesn't really change anything. It doesn't open your eyes. But if you take your stance in a comfortable way—a way that you can maintain because you've relaxed around it, and it doesn't rely on tensing anything up—then you watch as things come into your range of awareness, and you see how they come, you see how they go, you see what interactions there are that cause suffering, and you can learn how to stop them. Just drop them.

So the important work lies in the maintaining, because it's the force of the maintaining that shows you new things in the mind that you didn't see before. It allows you to withstand old habits, to replace them with the new ones, and to get to the point where the mind no longer can play tricks on itself, because you're there watching all the time. It has to behave itself. It stops creating suffering, and that's the end of the problem.

Metta Meditation

September 2, 2005

"May I be happy. May all living beings be happy." We chant that every night before we meditate. We're advised to think thoughts of goodwill like that at the end of the meditation, too. We chant them beforehand for two reasons. One is to remind ourselves of why we're meditating. The chant on happiness is accompanied by the chant on equanimity: All living beings are the owners of their actions. That's to remind us that happiness is not simply a matter of affirmation, it's something you actually have to do. It requires causes, actions that you have to do. And where do the actions come from? They come from the mind, from your intentions. So you have to train your intentions if you want to make sure that the results that are going to come out are the ones you want. Otherwise, the intentions of the mind pull you in all directions unless you train them to pull in one direction, which is the direction of true happiness. That's why we meditate: to train our intentions.

The second reason why we chant the chant on goodwill before meditating is to put the mind in a good mood. Thinking thoughts of goodwill feels good. Goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for other people, no animosity for anybody: It feels good to have those attitudes in mind. Sometimes when we're in the wrong mood, it's good to remind ourselves that the best happiness is the one that doesn't take anything away from anybody else—a happiness that doesn't impede the happiness of other people—and to remind ourselves that there is such a thing: the happiness that comes from within.

If, in the course of the day, you find yourself enmeshed in all kinds of struggles with other people, where your happiness seems to run at cross purposes with theirs, it puts you in a foul mood. You start looking at the human race as a whole, and it's nothing but struggle and conflict, where people are constantly taking advantage of one another. For what purpose? They keep doing it until they run out of steam and then they fall dead. Then they're replaced by other people. And they themselves, after they die, come back and start to struggle all over again. It all seems pointless. If that were all there were to the human race, it'd be a pretty miserable situation.

But, as the Buddha pointed out, that's not everything. There is a happiness that comes from training the mind—a happiness that comes from doing good things, developing qualities of mind like integrity, generosity, virtue, concentration, discernment. These are all good things to work on. The causes are good; the results are good. If you look at the human enterprise from this perspective, it takes on a whole new cast. And particularly if you look at your human enterprise, your life, what you're going to do with it: It feels a lot better if you can make up your mind that, yes, what you want is true happiness, harmless happiness, reminding yourself that there is a path to follow in that direction: this one we're following right here as we sit and meditate.

So these are good thoughts to think, to help you get in the right mood to meditate, because an important element in the meditation is to come with a good mood to the breath. If you come with a sense of frustration, exasperation, it's going to be reflected in the breath, and then the mind is going to reflect that back at the breath, and then it's like falling into a house of mirrors with a little monster between the mirrors. The monster just multiplies and gets magnified. But if you come to the breath with the right attitude, it's a different kind of house of mirrors. Different things get reflected and magnified, good things. The breath feels good, the mind feels good, and that gives you a basis for settling down, being on good terms with the breath, showing some goodwill for the breath. And even though we can't say the breath will show goodwill back to you, at least it'll show some pleasant feelings that you can settle down in. Try to be sensitive to those.

All too often, as we sit here and look at the body, the first things that pull our attention are the pains. It hurts here, it's tight there, it's tense here, and if you focus on those areas, they become the little monster in the hall of mirrors. Try to find the spaces between the pains and the parts of the body that feel okay. They don't have to be great. They just have to be relatively pleasant. Focus on them and allow them to continue to be relatively pleasant.

One of the things that you have to watch out for is the mind's tendency to tense up the spot where it's focused. So find a spot that feels good and think about keeping it relaxed, keeping it relaxed, keeping it relaxed as you keep tabs on it. If you slip off, be good-natured about coming back. As with any skill, the people who can laugh at their mistakes and then come back

and try to fix them: Those are the ones who will do well. That's the right attitude to have. If you get frustrated and start beating yourself up, that's the face that's going to fall back into the hall of mirrors, either the beater or the beaten, neither of which is something you want to see repeated infinitely.

When you come back to the breath, come back to the parts that feel good, learning how to be in a good mood and yet diligent at the same time. Persistent at the same time. Precise at the same time. This takes some practice but, after all, you find that this is the attitude that's going to get you into comfortable concentration. One of the purposes of concentration is to be at ease, to have a sense of comfort, a sense of pleasure, because the inside work we're going to be doing—and it will be work—requires that you stay in the present moment for long periods of time so that you can watch what's happening. You can follow that trajectory of the cause leading to its result. To do that, your gaze has to be steady, your foundation has to be strong, and any foundation that's based on a sense of frustration and strained effort is not going to last. If it's based on the sense of ease and a sense of belonging here in the present moment, then it's going to be solid. Very few things will be able to knock it over.

So keep bringing that attitude to the breath. Every time you slip off, come back and remind yourself: "May I be happy. May all living beings be happy." In that way, you'll find it easier to keep coming back, which is what the concentration is all about.

Concentration isn't something built up from nothing. We all have certain powers of concentration already. If we didn't, we wouldn't be human beings, or we wouldn't be sane human beings. So in the beginning you'll start out with momentary concentration. It's going to last for a while, then it's going to stop, and then you have to start it up again. Take that as a given. When you learn how to stay in the spots that feel comfortable and keep them relaxed as you're focused on them, that's what will allow the moments to connect. The concentration will last longer and longer—until you catch yourself at the point where the normal lifespan of your focus is about ready to give out, and yet you realize you have a second wind and you can keep going, keep going, keep going, because you've got your source of strength, your source of comfort.

That's what the work in concentration is about. You're working at a sense of ease, and that's different than straining or pushing or tightening

things up in order to get them done. The work is in the persistence, persistence in allowing a relaxed spot in the body to stay relaxed as you watch it.

It's in this way that when you come out of concentration, you'll feel goodwill as well. And this time, when you spread thoughts of goodwill to other beings, it'll have a different quality. It really will be a gift to them because it's coming from a sense of goodwill that's already there. Rather than a reminder to yourself, it's more a natural outcome of the concentration you've been doing. You allow the goodness in your mind, which already feels radiant, to radiate to others outside.

Goodwill & Heedfulness

December 21, 2011

The Buddha once said that all skillful qualities are rooted in heedfulness. This applies to goodwill as well. It's always important to keep that perspective in mind, that context in mind, when you're developing goodwill as a meditation practice. We're developing goodwill because there are dangers if we don't. You can see them in the principle of kamma: If you act on ill will, you'll create bad kamma. In fact, when the Buddha talks about developing goodwill, it's often in the context of realizing that you may have done something that's harmed other people, or harmed yourself. You've broken the precepts and you realize it's harming not only them but also you. You want to make sure you don't do that again. You want to make sure that you act on skillful principles, skillful motivations. This is why you develop goodwill, along with the other brahmaviharas, as a way of strengthening your motivation to act skillfully.

There's a famous sutta where two acrobats are up on the end of a bamboo pole, and the teacher, who's standing on the pole, says to his student, who's standing on his shoulders: "Now, you look after me and I'll look after you, and in that way we'll both come down safely." She says: "No. You look after yourself and I'll look after myself, and in that way we'll both come down safely." In other words, you take care of your sense of balance, I'll take care of my sense of balance, and that's how we'll be able to help each other along. And the Buddha says, in that particular case, the student was right. He goes on to state as a general principle that by looking after yourself, you look after others, but also that by looking after others, you look after yourself. By being kind to others, thoughtful, patient, compassionate, and treating them with goodwill, you're also looking after your own best interest. This is why we develop goodwill.

There's that famous story where King Pasenadi is alone in his bedroom with his queen. He turns to her and says, "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" Of course, he's hoping she'll say: "Yes, your majesty, you."

But she doesn't. She says, "No. And is there anyone you love more than yourself?" And the king has to admit, "No."

That's the end of that scene. So the king goes down to see the Buddha and reports what happened. The Buddha responds, "She's right. You could survey the whole world over and you'll never find anyone you love more than yourself. At the same time, if you think about other people, they love themselves just as fiercely." And the Buddha's conclusion here is interesting. It's not that this is a dog-eat-dog world. He simply notes that if you love yourself then you don't want to harm anyone else or get them to harm anyone. Because if you harm others, they're not going to be happy. If your happiness depends on their misery, they're not going to be happy, and they're not going to stand for it. That harm is going to come back at you one way or another.

So this is our primary motivation for developing goodwill. It's not that the mind is naturally compassionate, benevolent, or kind. It has the potential for kindness, but there are all kinds of other potentials as well. We do have the potential to be cruel. Our tongues are like knives, our arms and our hands are like guns: We can do all kinds of good or harm with these things. So this is why heedfulness lies at the base of goodwill. It's a question of getting your motivation straight.

So how do you do it? In the texts, the Buddha simply says that you extend thoughts of goodwill to the east, south, west, north, in all directions, in the same way that a trumpet player would play a note and the note would go in all directions. And you try to make it totally limitless. That's all he says. In later works they expand on this idea. They say you should start with yourself, telling yourself: "May I be happy and free from suffering. May I look after myself with ease." Then you spread that thought to people who are close to your heart. Then gradually work outwards in ever widening circles: to benefactors, good friends, people you're more neutral about, and people who are actually your adversaries, until you finally get to all beings everywhere.

So you might want to start with yourself first, although not necessarily always. Some people actually find it easier to start with thoughts of goodwill for someone who's been a benefactor, a person who has helped them. Whoever you find it easiest, start with that person first. Think about what it means to have goodwill for that person. It doesn't mean that you're going to

be there for that person all the time, simply that whatever you do or say or think that's going to have an impact on that person, you don't want it to harm them. If possible, you want them to act to skillfully, too. Because it's not that the case that your wishing them happiness is going to be like a magic wand that will light up a little light someplace in their head. After all, there is that phrase: "May they look after themselves with ease," in other words, may they know how to behave in such a way that actually does lead to true happiness.

This is where goodwill goes deeper than just hoping that people have a nice life. You hope that they, too, will act on skillful intentions. Is there any way that you can help that person act on skillful intentions? Think about this.

In other words, metta is not just a process of repeating a phrase over and over in your head. You contemplate the quality of goodwill and what it really means to have goodwill in the context of kamma, in the context of that principle of heedfulness.

The same applies when you extend thoughts of goodwill to yourself. You say to yourself: "May I be happy." So, what kind of happiness do you want? There's a lot that has been written on people who feel they don't deserve to be happy. In fact, I was reading recently a Dhamma teacher saying that most people don't have enough time when they're on weeklong metta retreats to think about anybody else, so they should focus all of their goodwill on themselves as a healing process. If you have trouble wishing for your own true happiness, then you may want to spend extra time here.

But you can't stop here. Remember, the whole purpose of this is to be skillful in your actions and to try to develop an attitude that there's nobody out there that you'd like to harm. So spend some time on yourself and think about what it would mean to truly have a goodwill for yourself. It doesn't mean eating a lot of Dove chocolates or indulging little pleasures. It means trying to act in a skillful way, realizing that your actions will have consequences that can go many times farther than you might even think. So in this case, having goodwill for yourself means being mindful, being alert.

It's not always the case that you start with people who are close to your heart or with yourself. There's one case where the Buddha says that if you're being cut up by saws by a group of bandits, you should start with spreading thoughts of goodwill to them: May they find true happiness. This is going to

be hard. But the reason that you're doing this is because you don't want to act unskillfully in that case. You don't want your mind to be obsessed with thoughts of revenge. Because suppose they kill you with those saws, do you want to be a spirit coming back to haunt those people? Do you want that to be your reason for living? Your purpose for taking on another life? It would be a miserable life. So again, it's for your own true happiness that you spread thoughts of goodwill to people who are really being harmful to you, hurting you, hurting people you love, hurting large numbers of the human race. If you're heedful, you can't let yourself feel ill will for these people.

One of the important exercises in goodwill is to ask yourself: Is there anybody out there for whom you really do have ill will? In other words, are there any people you would like to see suffer? Then try to think it through. Remember, you're not just thinking, "May they be happy as they continue to do harm." You're wishing: "May that person see the error of his or her ways, and stop doing that harm, realizing that it's not in his or her best interest. May that person understand what true happiness is, and what the causes of true happiness are."

Now, is that something you can't wish even for evil people? Part of the mind might say, "Well I'd like to see them squirm a little bit first." But think of that story of Angulimala in the Canon. Angulimala had killed almost 1,000 people and then suddenly was converted by the Buddha, ordained, and became arahant. A lot of people were upset that he was getting off scot free. Here he was, after murdering all those people, and now it seemed like he had a free pass out of jail. So they threw things at him. He'd be on his alms round, and they would throw pottery at him and break his head open. He'd come back from his alms round all bloody. The Buddha told him, "Well, remember, it could have been a lot worse."

Those were the people who continued to have ill will for someone who had changed his ways. They were upset that the way kamma works doesn't mean you have to die once for every time you've killed somebody. Kamma is a lot more complex than that. But the fact that he became an arahant meant that he was no longer killing anybody. The world was a lot better place because he had seen the error of his ways and stopped. They should have appreciated that.

So go through your list of the people you don't like. Remember, we're not asking you to like them, just learn how to develop goodwill: "May that

person see the error of his ways, may he stop that unskillful behavior, may he learn how to behave in a skillful way instead, may he understand true happiness, and how to find true happiness." Every time you detect yourself thinking thoughts of ill will for other people, stop and remember these points. Make it part of your practice of developing goodwill. You want to get to the point where you can feel this sort of goodwill for anyone you think about.

Now, it is important that you also have a sense of well-being as you do this. This is why, if you find that the goodwill meditation is getting dry, you stop and you work on your breath, trying to develop a way of breathing that feels good inside, nourishing inside. Ajaan Lee once said that if you don't have any sense of well-being or pleasure inside, then it's hard to wish for other beings' happiness. He gave the image of a large water tank. If there's water in the tank, then when you open the faucet, cool water comes out. If there's no water in the tank and you open the faucet, nothing but air comes out. And it's the same with your goodwill. There has to be a sense of well-being inside for it to really have force and to really be cooling.

So breath meditation and goodwill meditation help each other along. There are times when you need to develop goodwill in order to just be able to settle down with the breath, and other times where you need to work with the breath so the goodwill has a felt sense of well-being inside. So you practice these things together. If you find the breath meditation is getting dry, stop and remind yourself why you're here. It's for the sake of true happiness—not just your own true happiness, but also the happiness of others too.

Back when I was in Thailand and going for alms round every morning, there were days when some really poor people would put food into my bowl. I'd come back, and the thought would really strike me: "Here I am, the beneficiary of a poor person's generosity. I've got a lot to repay." So I'd dedicate my practice to that person.

So remember that when you're meditating here, it's not just for you. Other people are going to benefit. It begins with the example of more meditators in the world, more people trying to train their minds, and the fact that as you get your mind more and more in shape, you're coming from a position of strength, a position of well-being. You're more likely to act in a skillful way, and in that way everyone benefits.

This is how we practice goodwill meditation in the context of the Buddha's teachings on kamma and in the context of the principle of heedfulness. You're doing this because if you don't, there's a lot of danger, a lot of trouble ahead. But if you are able to develop goodwill for all, the world is a lot safer place. And you're a lot safer person in that world.

Gather 'Round the Breath

August 10, 2011

So here you are. At least, part of you is here. What you want to do is bring all of you here, all of your thoughts, all of your feelings, perceptions. Concentrate right around here. Ajaan Lee talks about two types of aggregates. There are those that basically head outside, interested in forms outside, feelings and perceptions of those forms, thoughts about those forms, and your awareness of those forms. Then there are those that hover around your mind.

So focus on the second kind. There are feelings right here hovering around your sense of awareness, perceptions that hold you here. The breath is very close, so focus on the breath first. Eventually, you'll be getting right at the sense of awareness itself. You'll have a perception that hovers around that, along with fabrications, the thoughts that protect that awareness, that try to keep it separate from other things. Even when you're aware of other things, there's a sense of separate awareness.

For the time being, focus on the breath, because, of the different properties of the body, it's the one closest to your awareness. It's what keeps the body and mind together. It's your glue. And it can be a very subtle glue because there are many levels of the breath. There's the obvious breath coming in and out, and then there are subtler breath energies that move through the body at different speeds. There's a kind of gentle massage that goes through the body as you breathe in, breathe out, and then there's a quicker movement of breath energy that goes through the body immediately. As soon as you start breathing in, it's already gone through the whole body. Then there's the breath energy that's very still. You can contact it at different spots in the body. Ajaan Lee talks of contacting it at the diaphragm. Other people find other spots where there's a sense of stillness in the midst of the movement of the in-and-out breath.

So try to bring all of your thoughts and awareness here. Gather everything here. This is one of the terms they often use in Thailand: to bring your mind together, to gather it together, ruam cai, so that the little

wandering parts that would want to go out and listen to the crickets or think about where you've been today, or where you're planning to go tomorrow or whatever: You can just cut those short. Head them back right here. Keep everything circling around right here: your awareness of the breath, your awareness of the mind together with the breath. You want your mindfulness to think about the breath, and to think about the mind, and your alertness to pay attention to both: How are things going with the breath? And to what extent is the mind staying with the breath?

In the beginning, you have to go back and forth between those two things until everything gathers together into one. Try to keep everything circling around right here. If there's some centrifugal force that's going to send something spinning out, just think of it coming right back, like a comet that goes way out to the fringes of the solar system but then comes back in toward the Sun again. Don't let anything head out and then just go away. Keep coming back, coming back, coming back, because you learn a lot about the mind as you keep directing it back. There will be those thoughts that want to head out someplace else, and you have to learn how to stop them.

And what's the best way to stop them? If you just clamp down on them, sometimes they'll sneak out in another direction. So you've got to learn how to unravel them. The first rule you have to make for yourself is that when you catch yourself in a thought wandering way, you don't have to finish the thought first before you come back. It may be a really good thought, and it would be nice to tie things up with a clean sense of closure, but you say: nope, nope, nope. You come right back. After all, if you try to finish the thoughts first, you're giving priority to the thought. Thoughts have their internal rules, their internal logic, and if you get stuck into those rules and that logic, it's going to be easy to slip off again the next time. So just leave things with frayed edges, frayed ends, and come back, come back, come back. Gather in again.

As you keep at this, there will be a sense that your awareness settles in, and then you try and maintain that, watch over it. Again, your mindfulness and alertness have to be active all the time as you're doing this. The mindfulness keeps reminding you: This is where you want to stay. Be on the lookout to watch out for any thoughts that want to pull away, the ones that say: "Enough of that, what's next?" Well, it's not enough yet. If it really were enough, you'd have no more defilements, and that would be the end of the

problem. You haven't reached that stage yet. You need more concentration. So any thoughts that complain about this, you have to recognize them for what they are—disturbances—and you can't identify with them.

What you're doing here is that you're shifting the balance of power inside, and giving more priority to this stillness. In the past, the priority was given to thought fabrication, and all the public relations work that thought fabrication does about itself, about how wonderful and useful it is, and how much you learn, and how much you get entertainment this way, and all the other voices in the mind that cheer you on in that direction. But now you're saying: No, the mind needs a place to settle in; it needs a place to rest. If it's going to gain any strength, if it's going to understand itself at all, it's got to be willing to stay here for a while. So give it a place where it can settle in and feel nice and snug.

Notice where the breath energy feels good inside the body, where there's a sense of fullness that you can maintain even as you're breathing out. It's not like you're filling up when you breathe in and then squeezing things out when you breathe out. You want to maintain the fullness even as the breath energy goes out. You don't have to push or squeeze anything out. What has to go out will go out. You don't have to expel it. Then you find that, over time, it's as if you're charging your battery. The energy builds, builds, builds, but it builds in a quiet and nourishing way, not in a tense and overstuffed way. That's the quality you're looking for.

So be careful not to let the metaphors and ideas that come from the words get in the way of having a sense of what really does feel good to settle in with, and what you can stay with for a long period of time. When we get the mind to settle down, it's not as if we're clamping down on it. And when we talk about the mind being wide open and free, that doesn't mean it's just going to wander around the meadow. It's centered, but on the edge there's no sense of clamping down. It's got a solid center but a wide-open periphery.

As for whatever discussion there is in the mind, again, whatever aggregates there are about perception or feeling, have them circle around the meditation to protect it. In the beginning, you will have to think about what you're doing. That's what the directed thought and evaluation are for. Even when those are dropped, there will be an element of intention that circles around the quietness, circles around the stillness to protect it.

So there will be some activity in the mind to begin with, circling around and looking for any cracks in the walls. Like that image the Buddha has of the gatekeeper who walks around the fortress to make sure there are no other ways of entry or exit from the fortress aside from the one main gate: You don't want your thoughts slipping off to the past, you don't want them slipping off to the future, down to the ravine, up to the mountain. You don't want them to go anywhere right now. Just let them circle around right here. Think of them as planets circling around the Sun, or the electromagnetic field circling around the Earth, protecting it from the Sun's energies.

For the time being, the whole rest of the world can go away. Think of that phrase in the formula for establishing mindfulness: putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any thoughts that refer to the world in any way at all, just drop them, drop them, drop them, cut them off and bring them back in. That way you find the strength that comes when everything does gather together.

In Thailand they like to use the image of thread. If you have individual threads scattered around, they have no strength at all. But if you weave them into a cloth, you can do lots of things with a cloth, and the threads get a lot stronger and a lot harder to rip. So you want to weave everything together here in the mind. All your thoughts and perceptions and feelings: Weave them together around the breath here. Allow the mind some time to be itself, not to take on any outside burdens, and to develop the strength that it can develop only when it's allowed to be still.

Allowing the Breath to Spread

November 3, 2006

Find a spot in the body where the breath feels comfortable, and allow it to stay comfortable. And notice the word "allow." We're not making the breath comfortable. We're letting it be comfortable. So you don't have to tense up around it, you don't have to do a lot to it, just watch it. As for any pains there may be in the body, you don't have to go to them. We know that one of the instructions in breath meditation, once you've been watching the breath as long or short, is to develop a whole-body awareness. But you have to build up to it. Sometimes it can be instantaneous. You focus on the breath and, as Ajaan Fuang used to say, the comfortable breath just explodes throughout the body, and there you are. Other times, though, you have to build up to it, because there may be parts of the body that don't go the way you want them to. They may be painful no matter how you breathe. So in the beginning stages, don't go there.

This is an important training for the mind right there. Our tendency is to fixate immediately on either pleasure or pain: pleasure, because we like it; pain, because we feel threatened by it. We have to do something about it. There are times when you have to tell yourself: Just don't go there yet. You're not ready for it. No matter how much you may be habituated to going to places like this, you have to train the mind to say: No, just stay right here, be content with what you've got.

It's like that storm we had here several years back: six hours of hundred mile-per-hour winds, and there was nowhere you could go. You had to stay in your little hut. No matter how much you might be worried about what was going on in the rest of the monastery, you couldn't go out to help because it was like going into a sandblaster. So you had to hunker down, just stay in your little spot where it was relatively safe, and tell yourself: You'll deal with whatever problems are happening on the outside later.

You may want the whole body to be comfortable, but when you can't do it, when there are parts of the body in pain no matter how you breathe, you're just butting your head against the wall to no purpose at all if you

keep trying to change them. Just tell yourself: "I'm just not going to go there for the time being." Ajaan Lee has a lot of analogies for this. One is of a house where some parts of the floorboards are rotten. If you're going to lie down and sleep, you sleep on the parts where the boards are sound. Or a mango that has a couple of rotten spots: You don't eat the rotten spots. You eat just the good flesh of the mango. Or of a person starting an orchard: If you try to plant trees throughout the whole orchard all at once, you may run into a drought, and all the money you invested is going to dry away. So you start out in just a little part, plant a few trees, and as the trees grow, they begin to give fruits, and then you can plant those fruits. You don't have to invest a lot of money. Just let the trees help you plant your orchard. In other words, when you have to start small, you start small. Learn to content yourself with what you can make comfortable.

As for the parts you can't make comfortable, realize that part of the problem is that you add to the problem, you add to the pain, you add to the suffering. This right here gives you an important lesson in the Buddha's teachings on dukkha, or suffering, stress. Some forms of suffering or stress are part of the three characteristics. In other words, everything conditioned is going to have some stress. There's not much you can do about that. But there are other kinds of suffering that are based on craving. That's stress in the four noble truths, which is based on craving. Because of the craving, you have your perceptions of your feelings that are based on craving, you have thought-constructs about your feelings that are based on a craving, even the ways you breathe are based on craving. Those are going to make the pain even worse. So remind yourself that the pain is not necessarily totally a given. Some of the pain you may be feeling has something to do with the way you're relating to it.

One way to learn to see this is, in the very beginning, to refuse to label the pain. Just don't go there at all. It can have one part of the body, but you don't have to try to get in the same part of the body where it is. And you don't have to maintain a long, internal dialogue about how much the pain is, or how long it's been there, or how much longer it's going to be there, or how it's bothering you, or why the pain is happening. Any thought that goes in the direction of the pain, you just allow to fall away. That allows you to focus on what you can change, what you can maintain in terms of the sense

of ease, the sense of well-being. It may not be large, but it's better than nothing.

So when you've found a spot in the body that you can make comfortable, think of it as precious. Look after it, tend to it, in the same way you would tend to a little garden in the city. The city, as a whole, has a lot of concrete, a lot of smoke, and a lot of pollution, but you try to create a little green spot. The difference here, of course, is that eventually you can let that green spot take over as it develops strength.

So start small, and if you have to keep it small, keep it small. Don't be in too great in a hurry to move around. After a while, once that spot is really solidly established, then you can expand it. Or, if you want, you can stay focused there, with the thought that if any sense of ease can come out of it and seep through the body, you'll be open to the idea that it can happen. Don't chase it around, don't push it here, don't push it there. Just think: Okay, there's a sense of ease, and it can radiate in any direction it wants to. Your duty is to just stay focused right there.

Brahmaviharas at the Breath

February 7, 2010

We chant the brahmaviharas, the four sublime attitudes, every evening before the meditation. It's to remind ourselves of the attitudes we should bring to ourselves and to other people: attitudes of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy or appreciation, and equanimity. You notice that the chant starts with extending these attitudes toward ourselves. One of the difficulties in learning how to master these attitudes is learning how to develop them at the right time, the right place. There are times when we have goodwill for ourselves and times when we don't; when we have compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, toward ourselves, and times when we don't. It's not necessarily easy to master the issue of when is the right time, when is the right place, for each of these attitudes. So it's good to think of the meditation as an opportunity to learn that skill with the breath.

Come to the breath with goodwill: May the breath be easeful; may you relate to it well. What does it mean to relate to it well? On the one hand, you want to explore it; on the other hand, you want to learn how to direct it. Explore its various ins and outs: long, short, deep, shallow, fast, slow, heavy, light. Explore the range of its possibilities. At the same time, learn to explore what the body needs in terms of the breath right now. What kind of breath would feel good? Make that your intention right now. That's the beginning of goodwill: learning how to find pleasure in a harmless way, learning to explore the various resources you have right at hand.

One of the themes in the teachings of the forest ajaans is that all you need for awakening is right here. You have it. You've got the body, you've got the breath, you've got the mind thinking and aware, and that's really all you need. Simply learn how to familiarize yourself with what you've got, the potentials of what you've got, for the purpose of a happiness that's true, lasting, harmless, blameless. So come to the breath with that attitude: You're here to learn its potentials, and then to see what, out of that wide range of potentials, is best for right now.

Following right in the wake of goodwill is compassion, on the one hand, and empathetic joy on the other. In other words, when things are not going well, you want them to go well, you want to explore to see what's going wrong, why the breath isn't comfortable so that you can make adjustments. Why is the mind not settling down with the breath? You put in the effort to find out: That's an expression of compassion. When things are going well, you learn how to maintain them.

On the one hand, this means not abandoning whatever you've got; on the other hand, it means not getting so excited that you ruin what you've got. This is an important skill in the meditation. When things are going well, how do you keep them going well? Not abandoning means that when you're having a meditation that's going well, don't stop. Suppose you've told yourself that you're going to meditate for an hour, and the hour is up. You say, "Well, that's it for right now, we'll just stop right here." Well, no. Try to maintain that sense of ease and well-being. If you have chores to do, you get up, and you try to maintain that sense of ease as you're doing your chores.

Ajaan Fuang once noted that if you're doing a chore around the monastery and you find you've lost your meditation, stop, and be still for a while, until you've got it back, and then continue. That's an expression of empathetic joy: When you've got something that's going well, you don't want to abandon it. At the same time, when you find yourself suddenly settling into a state of mind that's more peaceful, more rapturous, more pleasant than anything you've noticed before, you might have a tendency to get excited, and that ruins it. So you want to develop the attitude that when something good comes along: "Oh. There's this, too." No exclamation points.

And just because something seems good right at the beginning doesn't mean that it necessarily is good. So you want to watch it for a while. Learn how to maintain it, and watch it to see how it shows its true colors. Admittedly, this is going to be a difficult skill to master because it's so easy to get excited about something new in your meditation. You've been trying so hard for so long that when finally something seems to be a great breakthrough, you get excited. Well, just chalk that up to experience, and remind yourself: The next time this comes, you don't have to get excited about it. It's there, the potential is there for you to return to. Just keep your cool, and maintain that attitude: "Oh, there's this, too."

Then, finally, you'll find that there are certain things in the breath that, no matter what you do, you can't change: certain pains in the body, certain difficulties in breathing, as when you have a cold, or the simple fact that things are not going well, and for some reason you just can't figure it out. Well, try to maintain an attitude of equanimity. This means not getting upset, just keep plugging away, developing the patience you need to stick with the problem. But if you find you really can't get anything to change, you learn how to accept that fact for the time being.

With pains in certain parts of the body, as Ajaan Lee once said, it's like going into a house where some of the floorboards are rotten: You don't lie down on the floorboards. If there are pains in your knees, pains in your hips, you don't make that the focus of your attention. You focus on the parts that are comfortable. You remind yourself, after all, that those knees and those hips are not really yours. You have the choice as to whether or not you want to lay claim to the pain in those knees and hips, or just notice, "There is a pain," in the same way that there is a heater over on the other side of the room, or there's cold outside, or whatever the condition is that you can't really change: things you learn to accept about the world. Then you work with what you can change.

In this way, the meditation is practice in these four attitudes, learning when which one is appropriate and how to generate the appropriate one when you need it. This means learning how to develop the sensitivity to what you can change and what you can't change, and to make the most of what you can. All too often we focus on the things we can't change and get upset about them, while all these other potentials that we could really benefit from just stay undeveloped. But as you meditate, this is where you move from beginner's mind to expert's mind. In beginner's mind there are a lot of potentials, but a lot of them are unrealized, and you're totally unaware of them. Someone who's truly expert has learned how to find those potentials and explore them, to develop a sense of which potential you want to work on, which potential you're going to leave alone, where the possibilities are, and where the limitations are.

Hopefully, as you develop these skills in your meditation as they apply to the mind here, dealing with the present moment, looking after the mind's well-being, you can apply them to the situations around you. Because a similar principle applies: You want to have goodwill for yourself and for

everybody around you. If there are things you can do to help improve a situation, you work to improve it. When the situation is going well, you try to maintain it; you do your best to keep it going. With things you can't change, you learn how to accept that fact, and work around it.

When you develop this kind of sensitivity, you find that it really is for your true well-being and for the well-being of others. The basic principle in Buddhism is that happiness is not an either/or proposition. It's not a zero-sum game. In other words, your happiness doesn't have to depend on other people's suffering, and it doesn't mean that, in looking after your happiness, you're ignoring other people's happiness. Developing happiness through generosity, virtue, meditation, is a way of developing happiness that spreads around, and the dividing line between your well-being and other people's well-being gets dissolved.

So try to bring these attitudes to your meditation, develop them in your meditation, so that you become more sensitive to which of the attitudes is appropriate at any one time, and to how you can actually generate that attitude when it's needed. Then realize that these skills are not limited to how you relate to the breath. They relate to how you deal with the people around you, the situations around you.

In that way, they really do become brahmaviharas. The brahmaviharas aren't just goodwill, aren't just compassion, or empathetic joy, or equanimity. To be brahmaviharas, these attitudes have to be unlimited and you have to able to apply them to any case where they're appropriate at any time, to all beings. This is going to take work, because these attitudes don't come to us more naturally than their opposites. The potential for skillful attitudes and unskillful attitudes is always there in the mind. Heedfulness is what helps you develop the skillful ones—the realization that your choices are important, that life is short, our time here to meditate is short, our time with one another is short, and so you want to be as careful, as vigilant, and as discerning as possible in how you learn to get the most out of our short time here.

Turn Off the Automatic Pilot

December 5, 2011

The part of the mind that keeps shaping experience is something that lies very deep. And it's something we often don't pay attention to. We're more interested in the effects outside—so interested in things outside that we lose touch with where they come from. The part of the mind that shapes things is responsible for things we're doing right now, and in the past, of course, it was responsible for things we were doing then. What we're experiencing right now on another level is a combination of the results of those choices, those ideas, those intentions, past and present. This is why, when you go deep in your meditation, it's not so much a matter of hiding out or curling up. You're going in to find out what is it inside the mind that keeps pushing you to shape this, shape that, fabricate this, fabricate that.

If you learn how to fabricate things well, it has a good impact inside, outside—it has a good impact all around. This is why the practice of meditation is said to be meritorious. We don't usually think about the word "merit" when we come to meditation, but there is a lot of merit in what we're doing. Your mind is like a radio transmitter, sending out energies in all directions, lots of different levels, so you want to make sure that you're sending out good energy. This is the one thing about which you can really be responsible in your life. There are a lot of other things you've shaped in the past, and it's beyond your control how they're going to come back at you. But what you're doing right now can be under your control if you pay a lot of attention.

You look at the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation, and he mentions the word "fabrication" an awful lot. You try to be sensitive to the bodily fabrications, which is the way you breathe, and you try to calm it down. You try to be sensitive to mental fabrications, your thoughts of how you perceive things, how you feel things, and you try to calm that down as well.

So when you're working with the breath, you're engaging in these processes of fabrication very directly. If you hold certain perceptions of the

breath in mind, and you think of the breath energy as a continuum throughout the body, that's going to change the way you feel the breathing. You also notice how much pressure you're putting on the breath. In fact, it's one of the first things you begin to notice as soon as you focus on the breath: You're going to start controlling it. If you try to tell yourself, "I'm just going to be with the breath as it is naturally," the controlling element goes underground where you're not acknowledging it. That's not healthy. So you try to bring it up into your conscious awareness.

How can you breathe in a way that feels really good? If you haven't been paying much attention to the breath, it's going to take a while to get sensitive to what really does feel good for the body. Because when you're using your mind for other things, the breath energy gets trampled on. And, as with anything that's been trampled on a lot, it gets numb, or you get numb to it. So when you start paying attention to it, you're going to come in with a lot of preconceived notions of how it should be, and you'll probably try to force it in that direction. Then you get frustrated when you find it doesn't feel so good. You have to be patient. It takes a while for the sensitivity in your body to spring back. So you want to make a survey of the body to see where exactly you do have a sense of one way of breathing being more comfortable than another way of breathing. Focus on those areas first. Let them have their fill of good breath energy, and then from there you start spreading out into other areas, where you get more and more sensitive as time goes on.

As you get more sensitive to how you're fabricating the breath, you begin to look in other areas of your life as well, realizing that you have more control over certain parts of the mind that were previously on automatic pilot. Well, who designed that automatic pilot? Who set the automatic pilot? Usually, if we're not paying attention, greed, aversion, and delusion get to determine the default settings. This means you have to learn how to question them.

This is one of the reasons why we read Dhamma books: They help us question areas that we previously didn't question before. We just felt: This is the way it has to be, this is the way it is naturally, or whatever. So we just accept that and put up with it. We thought we were doing the right thing, we thought we were actually getting pleasure out of it. There are lots of different reasons why we go along with the default settings. But we're not paying careful attention.

If you really start paying careful attention, you start seeing that there are areas where you're adding a lot of stress where you don't have to. It may not seem like much stress from moment to moment, but it builds up. Try to catch these habits of the mind where you're applying too much stress, applying too much pressure, or shaping things in a way that's really not good for you. It's only when you sense these things that you realize that maybe there's a choice, maybe there is another way, and you start looking for the other way.

So as you try to get more and more sensitive to these areas inside, it can't help but have an impact on the areas in your life outside as well. It works both ways. When you decide that you're going to observe the precepts, you suddenly run up against areas where you've been negligent or not really paying much attention. That, too, helps to make you more sensitive. Then you can take that increased sensitivity and bring it inside, and you take the sensitivity you've developed inside and bring it outside.

All the different areas of your life, if you treat them as part of the practice, help one another as you gain in this kind of sensitivity. You pick up areas in your awareness that you've never noticed before because you were trampling all over them.

This is an important part of the meditation: getting off of our automatic pilot. We're used to letting it run things, so it's going to be awkward in the beginning as we try to develop these different kinds of sensitivity. But after a while, you'll find that it really is a lot better. You're quicker to sense when you're doing something unskillful, so you can learn how to stop. You develop a taste for developing skillful qualities in the mind and you can bring this into your relations with other people; you can bring this deeper into your meditation. The good effects spread in all directions.

It's like the ripples in a pond. When you throw a stone into a pond, the ripples don't always go out in the direction in which you threw the stone. They come back at you as well. They go in all directions. This is why at the end of the meditation we dedicate the merit of the meditation to other people, people we know personally who have helped us, people who have helped us in other ways—we may not know them personally but we know that they've been having a good impact on our lives—and then to all beings.

Because you want to be sensitive in all areas of your life, try to get the mind off of automatic pilot. Even though it may be disorienting in the

beginning, you find that everything goes a lot better when you put the time and energy into focusing on the area of life where you really do have responsibility, you really do have the opportunity to make the choice, and you shape things in a direction that's for the good of everyone.

Choiceful Awareness

July 21, 2012

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

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

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

Years back, there was the story of a monk who had gone to Ajaan Maha Boowa's monastery and declared to some of the junior monks there that he had no doubts about the Buddha's teachings—which in the vocabulary of the monastery was a declaration of stream entry. So someone reported this to Ajaan Maha Boowa, and Ajaan Maha Boowa put his hands over his eyes and said, "I have no doubts. I have no doubts about anything I see." Of course, you don't see anything with your hands over your eyes. The point he was making is that the monk was really not paying much attention. There's a lot to doubt; there's a lot to question yourself about in the practice. And this is not a matter of unskillful doubt. There are lots of things you can have skillful questions about. You want to explore.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

a section of the body that should be left alone and allowed to stay still. The sense of stillness that's full: That's what you allow to spread at the next stage.

There's a Dhamma talk where Ajaan Lee mentions that you don't want to spread the moving energy around. He's talking about this second stage, where there's just a sense of fullness, stillness, lightness, pleasure. Sometimes, paradoxically, the fullness feels empty, but there's a sense that it feels really good. You allow it to spread around. Let it spread through the body and allow all the still-energy areas to connect up. The breath will then get a lot more refined. You can pursue this to the point where everything grows totally still. Your thoughts are still; the breath is still; the body feels filled with still breath energy; the mind feels no need to go thinking about anything else.

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

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

This is how you approach the advanced level of meditation where the mind is making fewer and fewer choices after first choosing to be very sensitive to how you're making the choices and what the results are. You're practicing choiceful awareness: learning how the mind chooses to be still and chooses various ways of breathing and perceiving the breath and perceiving any distractions that may come up in such a way that you can maintain this stillness. If you're going to be thinking about inconstancy,

stress, or not-self—anicca, dukkha, anatta—focus that analysis on the distractions so that you can quickly let them dissolve. Allow your concentration and awareness of the breath to be as constant and pleasurable and as much under control as possible. It's in exercising these choices that you get really, really sensitive to what's going on.

That way, when the moment arrives where there's a genuine lack of choice, you're poised right at the threshold of something really important. It's because you've developed this sensitivity to choice that you can detect even the slightest glimmerings of choice that may come up in the mind. That's how you let them go. Without having developed this sensitivity, you won't see them. If you don't see them, there's no way you can let them go.

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

Artillery All Around

August 16, 2011

The mind is such an old hand at fabrication that it doesn't really notice all the fabrication it's doing all the time. You sit here watching the breath and you think it's just awareness with the breath, pure and simple. But the type of awareness you bring is already fabricated, and the breath itself is already fabricated. The Buddha calls the breath bodily fabrication, and, from the side of the mind, you're bringing in verbal fabrication and mental fabrication. There are the places where you direct your thinking and your evaluation of what's actually going on: That's the verbal fabrication. Then there are the feelings and perceptions you also bring: That's mental fabrication. We're doing this all the time. Every experience we have is taken from some raw materials from the past, which we then fabricate into a present experience.

It's like baking a cake. You don't just have a ready-made cake appear out of nowhere. You've got the eggs, the flour, and all the other ingredients; you put them together and then you have a cake. We approach our experiences as if they were ready-made cakes, but they're not. We're actually back there in the kitchen, cooking up these things.

So an important part of our practice is opening the door into the kitchen so that we can watch what's happening, and understand how we are fabricating things. To see that, you've got to get the mind very still. And it turns out that the only way you can get it very still is to fabricate it to be very still. So we use fabrications in order to understand fabrications. Not only that, in the process of fabricating a state of stillness, you're going to learn an awful lot about the process of fabrication as you master it.

So it's important that you realize that concentration and all the other factors of the path, all the other right factors, are things that we put together. We fabricate them, we develop them, as they say in the suttas.

Because we have different kinds of defilements, we're going to have to fabricate the path in lots of different ways. You look at the Buddha's teachings: He didn't teach just one meditation method. There's no one-size-

fits-all technique. He did spend more time describing breath meditation than any other method, and it works as the foundation for many other types of meditation. It, as the Buddha said, is the safest and most pleasant of all the meditation methods. But simply working with the breath is not going to be enough. On the one hand, it does give you experience in dealing directly with the bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication, but all your different strategies for fabricating your experience come from lots of different directions, so you're going to need different tools, different techniques to deal with all the different problems.

One of the functions of discernment is learning how to read a situation and figure out which technique you need. It's like going into the kitchen and tasting some dish you've got on the stove and realizing that something is wrong. If you have some experience, you can figure out: Maybe it's because it's too salty, or maybe because the heat is too low, or the heat is too high. You know what to do to fix it: That's your discernment as a cook. But if all you know is one cooking technique, and you try applying that to everything, you're going to end up with some very strange dishes. If all you can do is fry, you end up not only with fried eggs, but also fried cakes, fried salad, fried strawberries. So you've got to realize that there are other ways of fixing food. And the same with your mind: There are other ways of dealing with issues in the mind.

In the commentaries, they count forty different meditation topics, and there are a lot of others that don't even make it onto the list. So it's good to know some basic ones, and to realize that you can use different techniques to deal with different issues as they come up. You exercise your sensitivity in reading the situation, and your ingenuity in learning how to apply different methods: These are important means for developing discernment. Otherwise, you just do one method, one method, not even thinking, not taking any responsibility, and that's not going to develop discernment at all. Your defilements have their different tricks and techniques, and they're going to run all over you because they're going to know. They can see you coming from a mile away. You've got your one technique and they know how to hide, how to get around it.

It's like what happened in Singapore during World War II. The British figured that the Japanese were going to come from the ocean. So they put their cannons in cement, pointed out toward the ocean. All their artillery

was pointed at the ocean and was fixed that way. But then the Japanese came down the Malay Peninsula, and all the artillery was useless. It was pointed in the wrong direction.

So you need to develop an all-around view of your mind, and have a good range of techniques at your disposal.

As the Buddha said, there are essentially two main techniques. One is just watching a particular cause of stress. In that case, you just have to sit here very quietly and watch how that cause of stress arises and how it passes away. And with some of the defilements in the mind, just watching them is enough to make them embarrassed. You see right through them. But there are a lot more for which that doesn't work. This, the Buddha said, is where you have to exert a fabrication. In other words, start with bodily fabrication. Use your breath in different ways. Sometimes irritation is aggravated by breathing in an irritable way. So try to soothe the breath down, smooth it out. As the breath gets more and more comfortable, you find that you're less and less inclined to want to go with that irritation or whatever the problem was.

Then you've got verbal fabrication and mental fabrication. For instance, you may realize that you need to do some more metta practice: goodwill for yourself, goodwill for other people. That's exerting a fabrication. You're dealing with your directed thoughts, evaluations, and perceptions.

If you're feeling lazy, it's good to think about death, realizing that death can come at any time. You may feel that we're living in a safe environment here, and it is relatively safe, but it's not absolutely. You go out at night and there are snakes. We've had cougars come through, and of course there's always that earthquake they keep threatening. Lots of things could happen. Then there's your own body: Things outside can be perfectly safe, but suddenly your body has something go wrong. Something gets lodged in the blood vessels that nourish your heart, and that's it. The question always is: Are you ready to go? The answer usually is: No, not yet. In which case you've got to figure out: Okay, which qualities of mind do you have to develop right now? You've got to get to work on your meditation.

If you find that you're getting discouraged, you can contemplate the Buddha, you can contemplate the Sangha, think of their noble example. If the Buddha seems a little bit outside of your range, then remember the Sangha: all kinds of people, all kinds of backgrounds, educated, uneducated,

rich, poor, everything in between, men, women, children. A lot of them had real problems, yet they were able to overcome them. As the Buddha said, it's good to think about the fact that "If they can do it, so can I. They're human beings; I'm a human being. They were able to develop nobility of character; I can develop that, too. I don't have to spend my whole life just giving in to my impulses, giving in to my hunger and thirst, giving in to my laziness." Part of being a human being is developing some dignity. So think about whatever it is about the Buddha and the Sangha that inspires you to develop some dignity, and also gives you encouragement that this is something a human being can do, and that it's a good use of your life. That way, you can energize yourself on the path.

You can also contemplate the parts of the body, as in the chant we have of the 32 parts, starting with hair of the head, hair of the body, and all the way down the list. This is good for several things. One, of course is lust. Another is the sense of attachment we get to the body: You come to realize that no matter how nice it looks from the outside, you look inside and there's not much you'd want to look at. There's just a little film of skin over the top that makes it presentable. As the Buddha once said, whoever would think, based on a body like this, that one person could exalt himself and disparage others, either in terms of skin color or beauty or whatever: What is that, if not blindness? This contemplation is a great leveler.

It's also good for times when the mind wants to fall asleep. Sometimes you're getting bored with the breath, or something interesting is coming up in the mind but part of the mind wants to hide it from you. You start getting sleepy all of a sudden for no reason at all. The mind is playing tricks on you. I've always found that switching over to contemplation of the body is a good way of dealing with that kind of sleepiness. Sometimes it may be an issue of lust lurking around, trying to put an end to your meditation. "So, you're interested in the body? Well, let's look at it and see what it's got." There are other times when the mind is really scattered and isn't willing to settle down with the breath. Okay, if it's got the energy to think, come back and think about the parts of the body, visualize them, try to figure out where are they right now. Where are the different bones in your body right now? Where are the different organs?

Even as you're working with the breath, there are lots of different ways of working with the breath. Another cure for sleepiness that I've found is

that if focusing on one spot in the body gets you really blurry, make up your mind to focus on one spot for three breaths, and then another spot for three breaths, and then another spot, and another, and another, and just keep chasing these spots around the body. That could wake you up. Or if the mind is feeling really irritable, you can think of relaxing everything going down to the legs, down to the toes, think of yourself sitting in the middle of the breath, putting the breath all around you, with relaxation spreading out from the center in every direction.

So: lots of ways of playing with the breath. Lots of ways of playing with these different perceptions and feelings. And, as the Buddha says, lots of ways of exerting a fabrication to deal with the different defilements that come up.

An important part of being a skilled meditator is having a range of tools, a range of skills, and developing the sense to know how to read your situation, and how to figure out which of the tools is appropriate for that situation. Otherwise, you've got your artillery there set in the cement, pointing out uselessly to the sea, while the enemy army is swarming all behind you. Learn to develop an all-around vision, an artillery that can swivel around in all 360 degrees, so that no matter where the enemy comes from, or what technique or tactic they use, you've got the means to fight them off.

Views, Virtue, & Mindfulness

December 6, 2011

The Buddha compared mindfulness to a gatekeeper in a fortress at the edge of a frontier. In a fortress like that, you've got to have a gatekeeper who really knows what he's doing, knows whom to let in and whom not to let in, whom to trust, whom not to trust. In the same way, the function of mindfulness is to remember, to keep something in mind. In particular, you want to keep in mind what's skillful and what's unskillful, and to recognize skillful and unskillful qualities when they show their face. Then the function of right effort is to actually make the effort to encourage skillful qualities in the mind and to abandon unskillful ones.

There's a fair amount of judgment that goes along with that. You have to judge what's skillful and what's not skillful. It's like being a craftsperson. Say you're working on a chest of drawers, and you're doing the planning, the sawing, and the measuring. You've got to watch carefully what you're doing. If you see that you're making a mistake or that things aren't fitting together quite right, you've got to figure out what to do to fix the situation. That means you have to draw on your fund of knowledge from all the chests of drawers and other pieces of furniture you've made in the past. Because as you're working on a skill like that, you're always going to be running into problems. In the beginning, you depend on your teacher to point out what the problems are and how to solve them. But as you gain more and more experience, you begin to see the problems on your own, and can figure out the solutions on your own.

So that requires, on the one hand, knowledge, and two, a certain sense of confidence. You don't fall to pieces when the blade of the plane digs into the wood in a way that you didn't want it to. You figure out how to change what you're doing so that the mark doesn't show. And it's the same with the meditation. You build up experience, learning from books, learning from your teachers what to do with the meditation and, when problems come up, how to handle them. Then you notice on your own which problems you've been able to solve, and how you solved them in the past, and you want to

keep that knowledge in mind so if that problem comes up again, you have a technique ready.

At the same time, you need a certain amount of confidence that you can do this. You've done it in the past, and you're going to be able to keep on doing it into the future as you face issues that are more and more delicate, more and more refined, that go deeper into the mind.

If you're just starting out with the meditation, you need some practical experience outside of the meditation itself to build up that sense of confidence. This is why the Buddha talked about the two things that really help mindfulness along: purified virtue and views made straight. One of the ways in which these things help mindfulness is that you have to keep these things in mind, and in doing so, your mindfulness gets stronger.

With straightened-out views, you have to remember that the suffering you're experiencing right now is an important issue. That's the problem. Also, remember that the suffering that weighs down on the mind comes from within the mind itself. If there's going to be a solution, it has to come from within the mind as well.

That's all part of right view. In other words, your actions are what make all the difference, so the solution is going to have to come from your actions. You can't wait for some special being outside to come and solve the problem for you. If you believed that there will be somebody out there who's going to save you or deliver you from your sins or whatever, you wouldn't have to be all that mindful. You'd basically do what you want and hope that there's going to be salvation at the end from somebody else. You wouldn't have to really straighten out your act because someone else would do it for you. But if you realize that you're the one who has to do the work, you're going to have to keep in mind certain principles and the lessons you've learned. That gives you a lot more impetus to want to remember, "Well, what is skillful and what's not?" You want to keep this in mind as you're practicing.

Then there's purified virtue. This helps with mindfulness in a lot of ways. To begin with, if you're going to stick with the precepts, you have to keep them in mind. It's not a matter of going through the ceremony of taking the precepts and then hoping that the ceremony will take care of everything for you. You set up an intention that you're not going to kill, you're not going to steal, you're not going to have illicit sex, you're not going to lie, you're not going to take intoxicants, and then you stick with it.

Now, to stick with it, you have to keep remembering. If in the past you've been breaking these precepts, it's awfully easy to fall into those old habits. And when you fall into the old habits, you start developing some wrong views around them, about how you can't change, or that's just the way you are.

They did a study recently where they had people play a game where it was really easy to cheat, and it was pretty transparent that you could cheat and get away with it. Right before playing the game, the test subjects read some pieces on free will and determinism. One group read a piece that argued really strongly for determinism: that nobody has any free will, that whatever they are, that's the way they're going to be. The people who read that piece tended to cheat more than the others, who read a piece arguing strongly for free will. Of course, the people who cheated more wanted to justify it to themselves, saying, "Well, I just couldn't do it any other way." So it's a vicious circle. The wrong view leads to the wrong behavior, and the wrong behavior leads to the wrong view. As a result, you don't see any reason to try to remember what's skillful and what's not, because apparently it wouldn't make any difference—if that's what you believe, and that's how you've been behaving.

But if you realize that you can change your ways if you try hard enough, and if you figure out how to get around the temptation to break the precepts, that strengthens your understanding of why you want to be mindful, to keep on top of things.

At the same time, if you've been engaging in unskillful behavior, you don't want to think about it, you want to forget about it. The tendency to forget also becomes a habit, which makes it harder to develop mindfulness when you're going to sit down and meditate. Your mind ranges back into the past, and all you can see are unskillful things, so you start putting up walls of forgetfulness. That becomes a habit, a habit that's hard to get out of.

So that's still another reason why you want to develop this quality of virtue. You look back on your behavior and there's nothing to criticize yourself about. You gain a sense of confidence because you realize, "I can do this. I can make this change."

That's one of the reasons why the Buddha has you reflect on virtue when you find that your meditation is not going well. You realize that you do have some good to you. You have been able to change your ways in the past. You

have been able to learn from your mistakes. This thought makes it easier to recognize and learn from your mistakes in the meditation, because you're developing a more skillful attitude as to how to judge your behavior.

There's so much fear about judging behavior nowadays. That's basically a fear that comes from people who are really unskillful. They figure: "If I don't judge my behavior and don't judge other people's behavior, then they won't judge mine." It's kind of an easy out. But things don't work that way, and in the long run, you make things harder, not easier.

But if you've been learning how to get more skillful in your behavior, then when you make a mistake, it's not the end of the world. You know that you do have some good to you, so you're able to take mistakes in stride and not try to deny them or to forget about them—and at the same time, you're not defeated by them.

You're developing a quality that leads into concentration, because the purpose of being mindful is to bring the mind into a concentrated state, and one of the first factors in concentration is evaluation. You evaluate what's going on in the meditation: How's the breath going? Could it be better? If you're skilled at judging your own behavior in general, it's a lot easier to make skillful judgments about the breath, neither hypercritical nor hypocritical. You're able to see precisely what's happening and you have the confidence to try to figure out the solution—knowing that this is important, this is how you're going to straighten out the mind, this is how you're going to gain release from suffering.

This is why the Buddha started his instructions to Rahula with advice on how to act; one, how to be truthful; then two, how to evaluate your intentions, how to evaluate your actions, and how to learn from them, so that when you make a mistake it's not the end of the world. But at the same time, you recognize it as a mistake. You try to figure out how not to do it again, you seek the advice of others, you observe for yourself, and you develop the resolve that "I don't want to repeat that mistake; I don't want to harm myself; I don't want to harm others."

It's a way of developing compassion for yourself and for others. It's genuine compassion, not the compassion that says: "Well, we're going to go easy on people; we're not going to judge anything or anybody at all, just let things go." That's not compassionate at all. True compassion means, when you see you've made a mistake, you want to do what you can to learn how

not to repeat it. Because mistakes do cause harm, and it's only when you admit that they cause harm, and you realize that there's another way that's within your capabilities: That's when you're showing genuine compassion to yourself. That's when you're using your powers of judgment in a wise way.

So, what this comes down to is the fact that your practice of meditation isn't divorced from the way you live your life. These qualities of having right view, developing the virtues of right action and right speech: The Buddha listed these things before right mindfulness in the noble eightfold path because they really do provide the conditions that allow mindfulness to get really strong—so that when you learn a lesson, you'll remember it, you keep it in mind, and you can apply it again and again and again whenever appropriate. That's how the path develops and eventually all comes together.

Ekaggata

April 22, 2005

Alertness—the Pali word is sampajañña—has a special meaning when you're meditating. It means, specifically, being alert to what you're doing. For a lot of people, that's something very difficult. They focus on things outside, what other people are doing, and any reaction seems to just come up on its own from within. They don't usually ask questions about how much they're playing a role in all this. As a result, they end up causing themselves a lot of suffering—and a lot of suffering for people around them as well. So a basic part of the training in terms of generosity, virtue, meditation, is becoming more sensitive to your own actions.

It's interesting to note that when the Buddha starts out talking about the principle of action, he does it in the context of two particular types of action: gratitude and generosity. After all, what does gratitude mean, if not realizing that the people who have helped you made choices? It was their choice to help, their choice to do the right thing, and you value that. If you value that in other people, it means you're more likely to start valuing it in yourself as well. This is why gratitude is such a huge theme in the Buddha's teachings.

Then there's generosity. The teaching on generosity is not that you just give away, give away, give away. It always implies a trade. You always get something in return. And the better the gift—in terms of your motivation, your attitude, and the gift itself—the better the return. The purpose of this understanding is that it trains you to be more likely to give of yourself, to put out the effort. The Buddha wants you to be more sensitive to just that: the ways in which you're generous, and the things you get back from your generosity. When you begin to see the connection, that's when you start understanding the principle of action, and your alertness is going to get stronger.

He then moves on to the precepts. You have to be alert to what you're doing if you're going to stick with the precepts. You can't just make a promise to yourself and then trust that it's going to happen on its own

without your paying any attention to what you're doing. You promise yourself that you're not going to kill anything. Okay, watch yourself. No stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no intoxicants: In every case, watch yourself.

The precept on lying is particularly subtle, because there are so many little ways that we misrepresent the truth. So you've got to be especially careful there. And as you watch over your speech, you begin to see that when you're very careful about what you say, what you say becomes more worth listening to. People will start listening to it more. You begin to see the effect of the energy you put into the system, how it comes back.

This makes you more sensitive to the speech inside the mind. After all, the Buddha said that when we talk it comes from two mental activities: directed thought and evaluation. These are precisely the things we're working on as we meditate. You focus your thoughts on something, and then you observe it, you evaluate it. This is how alertness moves inside the mind. When you think of the breath in a particular way, when you focus on it in a particular way, what happens? Look carefully at this. The more time you spend looking at this, the more you begin to realize that some aspects of the breath can be affected by your present intention, while there are some things you can't change. That's something we can learn only through practice, coming back again, and again, and again to the breath. But it's important, because the more sensitive you are to how you do things, the better the results are going to be.

Ajaan Fuang once mentioned to me that when he was teaching meditation, people would often come up with weird things happening in their meditation: strange sensations in their bodies, difficulties that, he said, he himself had never encountered. But he found that those seven steps at the beginning of Method Two in Ajaan Lee's Keeping the Breath in Mind were a good guide to how to deal with anything that comes up in concentration practice. So it's useful to go back and look at them every now and then, to measure your meditation against those seven steps to see if something is lacking. Two of the important principles there are, one, getting a sense of the whole body. Ajaan Lee has you work toward that by going through the body section by section, so that the whole body becomes connected breath sensations.

That's the direction toward which you want to work. Otherwise, when the breath gets very subtle, and your concentration is beginning to settle in

but hasn't really settled down, the breath can seem to disappear, or you lose track of it. Or, because the mind isn't constantly monitoring what's going on, it begins to get blurry. All kinds of random thoughts come in, the synapses start firing in your mind, weird things come up, and you can easily get distracted.

There are two paradoxical ways of dealing with this. One is to broaden your sense of awareness, so that even when the breath gets very subtle, you've got a sense of the whole body to stay focused on. This is your frame of reference. You want to keep it large. It has a tendency to shrink, so you have to keep reminding yourself: "whole body" as you breathe in, "whole body" as you breathe out.

But that, too, can get blurry, so you have to balance it with a sharp focus. Ajaan Lee lists seven spots, what he calls "resting spots" for the breath in the body. They're like nodes. Some of them correspond with the chakras, which seem to be connected to what are called "breath channels." If you pay careful attention, you can sense them. Focus in on one of them, and the breath seems to spread from the spot where you're focused to fill out other areas of the body as well. You're in touch with one spot, but it helps connect you all over the body. The point just above the navel, the tip of the sternum, the base of the throat, the palate, the middle of the head, the top of the head: Choose any one of these spots that you find congenial and settle in. Be very careful to keep observing that spot.

Another way of developing this quality of being clearly focused is to go through the whole body in a lot of detail. Again, this is another way of dealing with that middle zone, as the mind is beginning to settle down. Go through the whole body taking a very precise survey—the tip of each finger, then the next joint of each finger, and then the next joint, and then up to the palm of the hand, the back of the hand, the wrist, the forearm—trying to be very, very precise. Then, once you've been through the body a couple of times, you can settle down. Choose one spot, make that your home base, and then from there think of the sense of awareness spreading out to fill the whole body.

So, you have both a broad range and a sharp focus. When you can keep the two of these balanced, the mind will really settle down. It's like you've tied all of its hands, all of its feet, so it can't grab this or grab that. You're right here in the present moment, both with that sharp focus and that broad

sense of awareness. In this way, you get both meanings of the word ekaggata: "one-pointedness" and "singleness as a whole." When you can get both of those qualities together, you can get past that middle range and settle into fixed penetration.

This is how you ride herd on your mind as you're trying to get it to settle down, so that it develops a sense of expansiveness, which is one of the really enjoyable parts of right concentration. It also has the clarity of a very sharp focus. You're going to need both if you want your concentration to form a good foundation for insight. Finding the right balance here is an important first step in using your insight, using your alertness, to make your concentration just right.

Training Your Minds

April 10, 2011

Close your eyes and focus on the breath. Take a few deep, long in-and-out breaths and see how the process of breathing feels. Notice where you feel it. What kind of sensations do you have in the body when you breathe in? What kind do you have when you breathe out? Where do you feel the breathing? We're not talking just about the air coming in and out through the nose, but the flow of energy in the body, which you can feel anywhere. But try to notice where it's most pronounced, where it's easiest to follow.

Then notice if it's comfortable. If it is comfortable, stay breathing the same way that you are. If it's not, you can make it longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier or lighter, faster or slower. Experiment for a while to see how different kinds of breathing feel for the body. You may notice that the body's needs will change over time, so that what feels good right now may not feel good in another five minutes. So try to keep on top of how the breathing feels.

If you have trouble sticking with the breath, use a meditation word to go along with it. We often use the word buddho, which means "awake." That's the quality of mind you're trying to develop: a mind that's awake, that's alert. Think bud- with the in-breath, dho with the out, bud-dho, until you can find that you can stay with the breath. Then you can put the meditation word aside and just be purely with the sensation of the breathing.

The trick is to stay, because the mind has a tendency to wander. That's what the word samsara means: wandering-on. It's not so much a place as an activity, something the mind keeps doing. It peeks in and looks around here for a while, and then drops that, and goes over and looks in that corner over there. If you were to make a map of where your mind has been in the course of the day, you'd see that it's all over the place. It would look like the thread in a sewing machine when everything gets all tangled.

And that's a real shame, because the mind is the most important thing in your life. It's what determines what you're going to do, what you're going to say, and what you're going to think. It determines the pleasure and pain

that you experience in life. For most of us, it's totally out of control. You make up your mind in the morning that you're going to do x, and then you go around and do not-x, or anti-x. You ask yourself why. Well, you forgot. Or other intentions came barging into the mind. It's as if you have more than one mind in there, and in a way, you do: lots of different desires, all of which are aimed at happiness, but a lot of them are misinformed. You think you gain happiness from wealth, but you try that for a while. Well, wealth has its problems. You try status, but that has its problems. You try popularity, but that has its problems. So you go back to wealth again. Maybe it wasn't so bad after all.

You keep going back and forth like this: lots of different desires, lots of different senses of even who you are, based on those desires. The Buddha's basic solution to all this is to tell you that you've got to train your mind. If your mind had one set way of being, one set way of doing things, it couldn't train itself. But, fortunately, because you have all those different senses of "you" in there, each of which is based around a desire, one of your selves can train another one of your selves, can see things that another self didn't see.

This is how the mind can train itself. You look at your sense of who you are and you can see that it changes from activity to activity. Sometimes your body is relevant, and the body becomes you. Because you have a sense of control over it, you can identify with it. You can tell it to move its arm, and it moves the arm; to move the leg, and it moves the leg. For the time being, at least, it works. But there are other activities where the body isn't so relevant. They're more purely an internal issue. You drop any sense of identification with the body and you start identifying with different factors in the mind.

In this way, your sense of who you are depends on what you have to control in order to get the happiness you want. It also depends on who you think is going to be experiencing that happiness: which part of you is going to be experiencing the pleasure of those different activities. So for each desire for happiness there's a "you" who can work on it and a "you" who's going to experience it. If you watch your mind long enough, you'll find that there are lots of different desires for happiness and lots of different senses of "you." The Buddha calls this I-making and my-making. You create your sense of I for a particular desire, and a my: the things you're going to gain, or the things you're going to be able to control to get that desire. Then either you get it, and that's the end of the issue; or you discover that when you gain

it, it wasn't all that great to begin with; or you don't gain it, so you drop that desire and try to find another one.

It's no wonder that the mind is such a mass of confusion, because there are so many people in there. They're like a huge committee, with lots of different agendas. What we're trying to do as we meditate is to find which members of the committee are most skillful, who actually do have the ability to bring about some happiness, a happiness that doesn't have any bad side effects. If your happiness involves the suffering of other people, there are going to be a lot of problems down the line. So you want to ask yourself: What kind of happiness would not cause other people to suffer?

Well, it is possible to develop a sense of well-being purely from developing your inner resources. That's what we're doing as we meditate. We try to develop our mindfulness, our alertness, concentration, discernment, our sensitivity as to what's really going on in the mind, so that we can train all of the members of the committee to see where true happiness lies, and what we can do to gain it.

Because this is one thing that all the members of the committees have in common: They all want happiness. Some of the members may be more difficult to train than the others, but it's not impossible as long as you realize that the mind is the big factor in life, and if it's going to find any happiness, it's got to be trained. That's one of the basic principles of wisdom. The Buddha said it's what distinguishes a wise person from a fool. The fool doesn't see any need to train the mind, so the fool looks for happiness outside. The wise person realizes: You've got to train the mind so that it doesn't sabotage its own happiness.

So we start with really basic qualities, like mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness means the ability to keep something in mind, like you're trying to keep the breath in mind right now. Try to remember each time you breathe in: Stay with the breath. Each time you breathe out: Stay with the breath. Then you try to remember to do it skillfully, i.e., find a way of breathing that feels really good. Then you develop your alertness, the ability to see what you're actually doing and the results you're actually getting. Are you staying with the breath? When you're focused on the breath, does it feel good, or are you focusing in a way that confines the breath, makes it ill at ease? Okay, try to change your focus.

That's what the third quality is, what the Buddha calls ardency: You're trying to do this skillfully. If you notice that something is not working, well, what can you do to make it work? Sometimes you focus too strongly on one spot and that creates tension there, creates pressure there, and that's unpleasant. So you want to back off a bit, but not so much that you lose the breath. The classic image is of trying to hold a baby chick in your hand. If you hold it too tightly, the chick dies. If you hold it too loosely, it flies away. So you've got to hold it just right. And your sense of "just right" is something you have to develop over time.

But as you work with this, trying to be mindful, trying to be alert, and trying to do this as skillfully as you can, you begin to notice things. And it does become a skill. These qualities of mind become stronger. That way, your unskillful mental states, the unskillful desires, that could slip in when there was a lapse in mindfulness or alertness have fewer and fewer openings to slip in. You can see them clearly: "Oh, that desire really doesn't create any happiness. It's something I may like, but if I look at the long-term results, I really don't want that after all."

Now it's one thing to see that, and another thing to actually drop the desire. This is why we work on developing a sense of ease and well-being with the breath, so that we have a better pleasure to compare. Because for most of us, we do things that we know are unskillful simply because we want that quick hit of a little bit of pleasure right now and we don't see anything better at the moment. But learning how to focus on the breath in a way that's comfortable allows you to withstand some of those desires. You realize: "I've got something better here right now, it feels good just breathing in, feels good breathing out." Try to think of that sense of ease spreading throughout the body. Think of the breath, as I said, not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but as the energy flow in the body.

When the energy flow feels good, think of it moving around the different parts of the body, working through any patterns of tension you may have in your arms, and your shoulders, in your back, in your legs, and any part of your face or your neck. You'll find, after a while, that it feels really good just sitting here breathing. It's a sense of pleasure that's free. You don't have to spend any money to gain this pleasure, and it's totally harmless—you're not harming anybody—and it's totally yours. Nobody else is going to move in

and push you out of the way to watch your breath. Your breath is your breath.

It brings you a sense of pleasure that doesn't involve any conflict, doesn't involve any harm. As you get more and more used to it, it begins to seep deeper and deeper inside, so that it really is gratifying. Then when the thought comes that you might want to do something based on greed, aversion, or delusion, you say, "Why bother? It's needless suffering. Why bother with it?" You've got something better.

This is how you train the mind: You develop good qualities that lead to knowledge and you also develop a sense of well-being that can sustain you. That way, the various unskillful members of the committee start getting converted. They begin to realize: This really is good, learning how to develop this sense of well-being inside, simply by sitting here breathing.

You begin to see that the qualities of mind that you develop can be used in other areas as well. The more mindful you are, the more alert you are, the easier it is to do other things skillfully in life. You make up your mind that you've got a specific job you've got to do, and it's a lot easier to stick with it all the way through to the end, to do it well, to do it skillfully.

There are many advantages to training the mind like this. In fact, it makes all the difference in the world. Everything you do, and say, and think, has an impact on how you experience the world. If you can train your actions in this way, the world will seem very different. You cause less suffering for yourself and less suffering for others as well. Because the stronger you are inside, the less you have to lean on other people, the less you have to impose on other people, the less you create burdens for other people.

So it's not as if working on your mind is a selfish activity. You're working on things that other people can't touch. They can't reach in. You may have had this experience: You're with somebody who's really suffering and yet you can't reach into them to help them. A very strong sense of helplessness comes when you realize, "This other person is suffering in a way that I can't touch." You see a baby crying, and no matter what you do, the baby just keeps on crying and crying. Or you see an old person who's demented, and you can't reach that person. Each of us has that inner area that nobody else can reach. When you're training the mind, you're training that part of yourself so that it can care for itself.

You notice that phrase we had in that chant just now: "May all living beings look after themselves with ease; may I look after myself with ease." It's good for all people to learn how to manage this really deep, inner area of themselves. When you've mastered that, then there's really no suffering deep down inside. And when there's no suffering deep down inside, you're not a burden to yourself. You're not a burden to other people.

This is why the meditation is a gift. You're taking care of the area where you really are responsible. That's another one of the Buddha's basic definitions of wisdom: that you take care of the area that you really are responsible for and you don't drop that to go meddling into other people's affairs or into things where you're not really responsible. The fact that we have the ability to create either suffering or happiness inside, and the fact that we use this ability to create so much suffering: That's our problem. That's something that we have to work on. Once you solve that problem, you solve all the other problems you're responsible for. Then you have energy left over to help other people—to be, at the very least, a good example for them, or to give them advice so they can work on their inner responsibilities, too.

See this as your most important task, realizing that your different senses of "you" all aim at happiness and yet so many of them end up causing suffering. You want to do something about that, and you do something about that by training the mind so that all the disparate members of your committee start working together in a way that really does lead to the happiness you want, that all of them want. That's how you stop creating problems and stop suffering from problems.

It's a simple activity, staying here with the breath. But it has a lot of ramifications—because it's training the most important part of your life to be wise, to be skillful, to find a happiness that's really true.

Equanimity

September 27, 2011

When the Buddha lists the factors for awakening, equanimity comes at the end of the list, which gives the impression that it's the highest of the list. And in one way it is, but in many ways it's not. It's listed as one of the factors that are useful only on some occasions. When the mind is overly excited, overly energetic, overly worked up about things, equanimity is one of the calming factors. It goes together with calm and concentration. When your energy is too low, though, that's not the time to be developing equanimity. You have to work on the factors that are more energizing: analysis of qualities, rapture, and persistence. Otherwise, your practice will stagnate.

So you have to use your equanimity together with your discernment to figure out what's just right. There's a story that Ajaan Chah told about a time when he was invited to the palace in Bangkok along with a couple of other ajaans. The King was worried at the time about some political problems: a standoff between the students and the military. There were demonstrations in the streets. After the meal, he asked the ajaans what to do. The other two ajaans were more senior to Ajaan Chah, so they spoke first. They both recommended that the King develop equanimity. When it came Ajaan Chah's turn he said, "Well, yes, you need to develop equanimity, but you have to develop it together with discernment."

The discernment here is a matter of knowing what to accept and what not to accept, or what not to be equanimous about. This connects with two principles. One is that there are some areas where you can make a difference, and those are areas that you don't want to just leave alone. If you can make a difference for the better, that's what you focus on doing. Leave equanimity for the areas where you really can't make a difference.

The other principle is that there are some things in the mind that respond just to your watching them. In other words, certain kinds of greed, aversion, or delusion come up, and when you recognize them for what they are, it's as if they get embarrassed and they just go away. There are other instances, though, where they're not embarrassed at all. When you look at

them, they stare right back. They're firmly entrenched. They're armed with lots of arguments, lots of justifications, and you can sit there and watch and watch and watch as much as you like, but they're not going to go away. They may go away after a while, but they come back—and keep coming back until you dig down and do something about them.

That's when the Buddha says that you have to use the fabrications of exertion. In other words, you use the way you breathe, you use the way you think about things, evaluate things, you use your perceptions and feelings to deal with those problems—to figure out where they're coming from and what you can do to undercut them so that eventually they don't come back.

So you need to use your discernment together with your equanimity to know when you let things be and when you don't.

It's important to recognize that there are three levels to equanimity. The first one is the one the Buddha taught his son, Rahula, when he first taught him meditation. His first instruction: Make your mind like earth. People spit on the earth, people throw dirty things on the earth, but the earth doesn't recoil. Make your mind like water. People use water to wash dirty things away, but the water isn't upset. Make it like fire and wind. Fire burns dirty things, wind blows dirty things around, but the fire and wind aren't affected by them. So a very beginning instruction in meditation is that you have to make your mind really solid, and not run away from unpleasant things. This is where equanimity is combined with your powers of endurance.

Now, the Buddha's not saying that you make the mind like a lump of dirt, totally unresponsive. The purpose here is to make it solid so that you can watch things carefully, and watch them in a reliable way. If you're the sort of person who runs away from negative things, you're never going to know them. You're never going to understand them. So we're not here just to put up with things, or just to be equanimous. We're here to endure them so that we can understand them: how they come, how they go. Learn how to observe them so that you can see problems and solve them.

This is shown in how the Buddha followed up those instructions. After telling Rahula to make his mind like earth, he then taught him the steps for breath meditation, which involve a lot of proactive involvement with the breath, a lot of experimentation where you have to learn how to judge the results of your experiments in a reliable way. You're not just sitting there letting the breath come in and go out any old which way. In fact, the Buddha

criticized those who practiced breath meditation by just letting the breath come in and go out while trying to be equanimous all the time.

In the Buddha's sixteen steps, you train yourself to breathe being aware of the whole body, you try to calm down the effect that the breath has on the body, you breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture, that gives rise to a sense of pleasure and ease, you learn to breathe in a way that calms down the effect of feelings and perceptions on the body and on the mind. Then while you're breathing in and out, if you see that the mind needs to be gladdened, you gladden it. If it needs to be steadied, you steady it. If it needs to be released, you release it. In other words, in this case equanimity is the foundation for acting skillfully: assessing the situation, making a difference where you can, and reading the results of your actions in a fair and objective way. That's the first level of equanimity.

The second level comes when you really can get the mind to settle down and be still in concentration so that there's a sense of ease and rapture. Then the ease and rapture fade away, so you're left with equanimity. That's when the mind is really solid and even more observant, aware all around. This is the kind of equanimity you can use to watch subtle things clearly in the mind. You begin to notice some of the defilements in the mind—and they are defilements. We usually don't like to use the word "defilement" with regard to our thoughts and emotions, but that's often what they are. They cloud the mind; they darken the mind.

The equanimity that comes from concentration is useful in some cases in dealing with problems of the mind, because you begin to see that the mind has all kinds of ways of creating problems for itself. When you see that the problems are superfluous, it's very easy to let go. Those are the ones that aren't really deeply rooted.

That leaves the deeper problems, and these are the ones where you really do have to figure them out, to understand: "Where is this coming from? Exactly why does the mind go for greed, aversion, and delusion? Why does it like these things?"

As the Buddha said, if you're going to go beyond these defilements, you have to figure out how they come about, how they disappear, and how they're going to come back again after they disappear. Then you figure out what their allure is: Why do you like them? What is there about greed that

you really like? What is there about anger that you really like? Usually, it's something you don't want to admit to yourself, so it's hard to see.

This is why the solidity of equanimity is, again, a useful foundation for seeing these things so that you can finally admit to yourself that, yes, there is that element in the mind, there's that desire, there's that taste in the mind, that really likes these things.

Then you compare the allure with the drawbacks. Is the taste worth the price you pay? It's amazing how the mind can very easily magnify the taste and try to minimize the drawbacks. But, again, the equanimity of concentration is a good foundation for seeing this. As you get a greater sense of well-being and stability in the mind, there's less hunger, and when there's less hunger you don't fall for the things that look like food but make you pay a heavy price in the end—because now you've already got better food.

As you use this foundation of equanimity for analyzing things, understanding things, you finally get to the point where you can develop the dispassion that can fully let them go.

This opens up to an even higher level of equanimity: the equanimity that comes when you've found true happiness. There's nothing else you have to struggle for, and you can look at all the different things in the area of sights, sounds, smells, taste, tactile sensations, and ideas, where you used to go foraging for food, and you don't feel any desire to go looking there anymore. Ever. You've got something better.

This level of equanimity is one of the by-products of reaching the goal. It's not the essence of the goal. Sometimes you hear the factors for awakening being described as descriptions of awakening itself, but that's not the case. They're part of the path. They're to be developed. The goal is something even beyond developing, and as the Buddha said, it's the highest happiness. From the outside it may look like equanimity, but from inside it's a totally satisfying happiness.

So there's an equanimity that's a product of the practice, and there are levels of equanimity that function as factors in the practice. Don't confuse the two. The factors of the practice are the ones we need to pay attention to. The one that's a by-product is going to happen on its own. But the ones we work with—developing the equanimity that allows us to endure things, developing an even deeper equanimity that allows us to see things really

clearly, very deeply in the mind: Those are the ones you want to focus on because those are the ones you can do; those are the ones you can be responsible for. As for the results, they'll take care of themselves.

But it's always essential that you understand that equanimity is only one of the factors, and not the whole path. You need to use your discernment to figure out when it's appropriate and when the more proactive side of the path has to come into play. The discernment is what does the real work, so make sure that it's as sharp as possible. This is one of the reasons why analysis of qualities comes so early in the list of the factors for awakening, because it has to inform all the other ones—your mindfulness, your persistence, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity—to make sure they stay pointed in the right direction.

A Mirror for the Mind

January 21, 2012

There's a passage in one of Ajaan Lee's talks where he says that the breath is like a mirror for the mind. This is why we look so intently at the breath, because it's going to teach us some very important lessons about the mind. In particular, it'll show us how to find happiness by understanding where we cause suffering, because all the suffering that weighs the mind down comes out of the mind. But because it's so difficult to look directly at the mind, we have to look in a mirror. It's like trying to look directly at our own face. If you cross your eyes, you can see your nose, but there's not much else of your face that you can see directly. So you have to look very carefully in a mirror. The more carefully you look in the mirror, the more you're going to see of your face.

It's the same way with the breath. The more carefully you look at the breath, the more you're going to be able to see the mind.

As with any mirror, you've got to learn how to make sure that it's flat and gives an undistorted reflection. So try to keep the breath as smooth and normal as possible. Now "normal" here doesn't mean that it's just ordinary. "Normal" means that it feels healthy for the body. That takes a lot of exploring right there, because many of us are used to breathing in unhealthy ways, ways that seem natural because we've been doing them so long. But if you start asking questions about the breath—how it could be better, comparing the different types of breath energy in the body with one another—you begin to see that things may be out of balance. The left side may be doing the work of the breath more than the right side. Or you may be using the muscles of the head too much, thinking that somehow you can pull the breath in through your nose by tightening the muscles in your head—or tightening the muscles of your neck, or your shoulders, all of which is totally unnecessary and doesn't help the breath at all.

We picked up a lot of our ideas about breathing back when we were little kids, when we didn't know very much, so it's important that we stop and take a look at this very basic process here—how we breathe—and ask a few

questions about how we can breathe better, in a way that's more balanced. Check to see: Do you tighten up around pains in the body? Do you tighten up around old pains that are no longer there? Many times, as you work through the body or work through the breath, you'll find a pattern of tension in the background that you hadn't really noticed was there before. As you allow it to release, a memory of an old injury will come up. You begin to realize that you've been holding that tension since the injury.

So you poke around and explore, and as you do this you're employing some very important factors of the mind. This is how you begin to see the mind reflected in the breath. There's that chant we had just now, describing the first jhāna. The first jhāna employs directed thought and evaluation, which means that you direct your attention to the issues of the breath, and then you evaluate how it's going, and in what ways you can make it better. Then, when it does go well, how can you make the most out of that sense of pleasure? Not by wallowing in it, but by allowing it to spread and directing it in certain ways to see if that helps, all the while learning how much direction is enough and how much is too much. Sometimes, if you change the breath energy too drastically, it's going to give you headaches. So you've got to be careful.

As you do this, your powers of evaluation will develop, and your habit of directing your mind to one topic will get stronger. This, of course, has lots of uses. If you have other jobs to do as you go through the day, jobs where you have to keep your mind on topic, you learn that you've got a stronger ability to do that because you've exercised these activities with the breath. That's one of the side benefits of meditation.

As you work with the breath and try and make it more comfortable, you're dropping, as the Buddha said, unskillful mental qualities. You're not really thinking about the sensual pleasures you might look for tomorrow or the sensual pleasures you enjoyed today. You're focused simply on how the breathing feels right now in the body, the space of the body as you feel it from within, which is a higher level of pleasure. As you develop and work with the breath energy, you develop a sense of ease, well-being, pleasure, called sukha in Pali.

Then there's the word piti, which usually is translated as "rapture," but also means "refreshment." Sometimes "rapture" seems a bit too strong as a description for what you feel. Other times, "rapture" seems just right, as

when there's a very strong, intense feeling of the energy going in waves through the body.

These two very pleasant feelings come from the fact that your mind isn't engaged in sensuality. It's more engaged in just looking at the breath in and of itself, engaged in directed thought and evaluation around the breath. You begin to see that your state of mind feels more at ease, nourished, stronger. You begin to see how you actually have the power to shape your state of mind in the present moment, simply through these processes of directed thought and evaluation that gave rise to very pleasant feelings.

There are also the perceptions and feelings you use to stay with the breath: These are called mental fabrications because they're the mental processes that really have an impact on shaping your state of mind. In this case, the perception of the breath and the different ways of perceiving the breath allow it to become more comfortable. The sense of well-being, the sense of refreshment sooth both the body and the mind.

So you've got all the factors that the Buddha said shape the mind right here. You've got the breath, which influences the way you experience the body, and that has a huge impact on your emotions. When things that ordinarily would irritate you come up but the breath feels really comfortable and you're very immersed in this sensation of comfortable breathing, you find that the irritation just doesn't take over. It doesn't grab hold of you as an emotion. It just passes by, passes by. It's when a particular thought starts to hijack the breath: That's when the emotion digs in and becomes more than just a thought.

This is one of the ways to protect the mind from unskillful mental states, by getting the breath really comfortable and using your powers of directed thought and evaluation to keep it that way, to allow the sense of ease that comes when you're breathing in a healthy nourishing way to seep throughout the body, to suffuse the body, to permeate everything.

This is how you learn about the mind by dealing with the breath. You begin to see how these functions really are important. As the breath gets more and more calm, more full, the activity of the in-and-out breath gets more and more refined. The sense of ease and well-being gets more refined. It goes through the various stages of jhāna until everything just gets very, very still. Even the in-and-out breathing can get very still because the breath channels throughout the body have a sense of fullness and they're all

connected. If anything is lacking anywhere, the lack can be very quickly made up without your even having to bring the breath in or to expel it in the ordinary way. Just by keeping connected, everything stays nourished. Your breathing gradually stops, not because you're trying to stop it, but simply because you don't have any need to breathe.

That's when the activities of the mind really get clear, because there's no interference from the body. It's like tuning a radio. If you have interfering noises, the signal isn't all that clear. But as soon as the interference gets tuned out, there's the signal, sharp and clear. When the movement of the breath calms down, the movements of the mind become more obvious because now your mirror is well polished. It's smooth, flat. You can see clearly whatever goes on in the mind.

And because you've been made sensitive to these movements of directed thought and evaluation, then as soon as they happen, you know them. A perception arises and you know that. This is probably one of the major lessons you learn from concentration: what a huge role your perceptions play—"perceptions" here meaning the images, the mental labels you use to tell yourself: This is this, and that is that. It was the mental label of the breath that allowed you to stay with the breath, together with the mental label of stillness, and reminding yourself that the stillness doesn't mean that you're going to be starved of breath energy. Everything is simply full. You keep that perception in mind and it's easy to stay with the sense of stillness. Some people, when they hit this level of stillness, get afraid. They're not breathing and they're afraid they're going to die. Well, if the body needs to breathe, it's going to breathe. You don't have to worry about it. You keep that perception in mind and it enables you to stay here.

You start seeing how these perceptions have a huge impact on the way you experience things. The more clearly you see the mind in this way, the more clearly you'll be able to see exactly what it's doing that's causing unnecessary stress anywhere in the body, in the mind. Because you see all of this as mental actions, and you see that these actions have immediate impacts. That's how you can start dealing with the big problem of stress—understanding how it's caused and how you can put an end to it—because it's all happening right here. You've got a really clear mirror, a mirror that fills the body so that any action of the mind can be detected as soon as it happens.

This is why concentration is such an essential part of the practice. It gives you the strength to stay here continually. And as you get the mind to settle down, you've learned a lot about the mind in the process, so that when things are really still, you recognize the different movements in the mind for what they are.

So work on polishing your mirror, because it helps you see things that you wouldn't have seen before—important things, the things that shape your life—and it gives you the opportunity to shape your life in a better way. It's like looking in a mirror and seeing that you've got dirt on your face. Well, you can wash it off. Or like seeing that your clothes are not matched, so you can change your clothing. It's not just a matter of sitting and watching things and saying: "Oh, that's the way they are." You see what can be changed for the better.

Make sure that the mirror is good and you know how to use it, and everything else will follow.

Centered in the Body

May 8, 2007

In one of the suttas on mindfulness of the body, the Buddha gives an image of how we should practice. He says: Suppose there's a man, and they've placed a bowl of oil on his head. The bowl is full to the brim. There's a beauty queen who is singing and dancing, and a crowd of people excited about the beauty queen singing and dancing, and the man has to walk between the two. There's another man following behind him with a raised sword, and if the first man lets even a drop of oil spill, the man with the raised sword is going to cut off his head. So the Buddha asks: Will that first man allow his attention to be distracted by the beauty queen or by the crowd? The answer, of course, is No, because he knows he would die.

We should try to practice our mindfulness of the body with the same attitude: If our mindfulness slips, our goodness will die. Whatever the situation, keep yourself in the body, be in touch with the energy in the body, how the breath is feeling. You may not be able to follow all the details of the in-and-out breath, but you can have a general sense of how the body feels.

Or you can choose one spot in the body as your spot and stay there. Always be in touch with that one spot. Allow it to be relaxed, let the blood flow smoothly, openly through that spot, and just keep in touch with it to notice when it gets constricted and when it's open. It's good to choose a spot on the body that tends to tighten up when you get anxious or fearful, and do everything you can to keep that spot open, even in situations where you feel anxiety or fear—knowing that if you lose focus, defilements are going to cut off your head, ignorance is going to put a big bag over your head so you can't see anything.

What this means, of course, is that our practice is meant to be taken throughout all of our life, not just while we're sitting here with our eyes closed. The lessons we learn sitting with your eyes closed are not meant to be left here on your meditation spot. The training is in how you go through life as a whole, how to maintain contact with the breath in spite of distractions. While you're sitting here with your eyes closed, the distractions

are almost entirely mental. You should take this same attitude toward external distractions. The meditation lessons are lessons on how to live.

That image of the beauty queen singing and dancing can stand for external attractions, and the crowd, of course, is all the stuff flowing up from your mind, reacting, looking for things out there. The mind doesn't just react. It also goes out looking for things. It flows out. This is Ajaan Lee's explanation of the word asava. Luang Puu Dune also talks about how the mind, flowing out, is the cause of suffering. So you want to be able to see the flow.

Notice in that image that there's only one person on one side to stand for external objects, but there's a whole crowd on the other side. You've got lots and lots of hungers and thirsts, desires, and aversions that can be excited at any time. The only way you're going to see these things is if you don't flow along with them.

This is why you want to maintain that inner focus. You have your spot where you stay. The only way you can see things flowing, have a sense of how fast they're flowing, how strong they are flowing, where they're coming from, is if you stand still. It's like those markers they have on the side of the river that tell how high the rivers have gone. They want to measure when it's flooding, when it's low, how high the flood is, how low the water is when it's low. If the marker were to go up or down or to float down the river, you'd have no idea of the river's level.

You've got to find one spot where you stay centered, where you stand still, so that you can catch the flowing of the mind. Sometimes you do this while you're sitting, but a lot of the really good insights come when you're doing walking meditation, or just going around doing your chores in the course of the day. Sometimes when you're sitting in meditation, it's like a schoolroom of kids who behave while their teacher is in the room. It's when the teacher is a little bit distracted that some of the kids get a sense that they can sneak around, or play, or run around the room, or whatever.

It's the same with walking meditation. Even when you're very focused in walking meditation, you still have to be aware of how the body is moving, when you're coming to the end of the path. That slight bit of distraction can often leave a little bit of an opening. As they say in Thai, suam roi: The defilements can step in your footsteps as you're looking out, and all of a sudden you find yourself gone if you're not paying attention. Walking

meditation is a good opportunity to see how the mind flows out. You're trying to maintain your center and you notice that it gets a little wobbly. Okay, why is it getting a little wobbly? It's not so much from the impact of things flowing in. It's things flowing out.

There's a physical sense that goes with the mind flowing out. A good place to catch this is right there at the tip of the sternum, right in the area of the heart. There's an outflow of energy and if you can catch it, you can see it flowing out—but you don't flow with it. That's your opportunity to see when there is a flow, how strong it is, and where the flow is coming from.

When you've learned to do this while you're walking, then you can start doing it in all your other activities. The important thing is that you have that sense of a balanced center, like the man with the bowl of oil on his head. You have to be very centered, very balanced. Otherwise, it's like trying to throw a pot on a potter's wheel. If you're not balanced and centered, your hands are going to slip a little bit, and the pot's not going to be a pot. It's going to be this mess of clay.

As the world spins around you, you try to stay as centered as possible so that you can catch yourself flowing after the world. Again, the spinning is not so much the problem. It's that you tend to flow out and want to spin along with it. That's why we suffer.

So, as Ajaan Lee says, you want to know the objects after which you spin, but also the flow of the mind after them. And what's the awareness from which that flow comes? Check for these things. The only way you can do it, though, is to have that strong sense of center—established, firm, still—as the body moves through life. The lessons we're learning here, on how to stay with the center, are meant to be taken with you as you go, so that the day isn't divided up into times.

Ajaan Fuang had a nice image once. He said most of us live our lives divided into little times: time to eat, time to talk, time to do our chores, time to meditate. It all turns into times, he says. What you want to do is make your practice timeless, so that it's timeless throughout the day. No matter what time it is outside, it's always practice time inside. It's time to be centered inside. That's the only way you're going to understand anything.

Mindful Judgment

March 28, 2010

We meditate because the mind needs to be developed, or the good qualities in the mind need to be developed. The word for meditation in Pali, bhavana, means literally that: development, bringing things into being, or taking what's already there and strengthening it.

Mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment: These are all things we have to some extent, and what we're doing is learning how to take what we've got, to appreciate the good things we've got in the mind, and improve the conditions for their growing. It's not the case that the mind is innately good or innately bad. It's got good qualities and bad qualities all mixed up together. The more delusion we have about what's good and what's bad, the harder it is to figure out what needs to be developed and what needs to be abandoned.

We need to develop this quality of learning how to ferret out what's skillful and what's not. On the one hand, we can benefit from gaining instruction from outside to point us in directions where we should look, but that instruction has to be proven in our own practice. We have to see for ourselves. In other words, just because a teaching comes in a text, or they say the Buddha said this, or whoever said it, doesn't necessarily mean that it's true. But if the source seems reliable, that does mean that it's something you want to look into. You want to test it for yourself. And you want to develop the qualities of mind that make you reliable in evaluating the test.

This is why we begin with mindfulness, alertness, and concentration. These are the qualities that make you a steady observer, a more reliable observer. You need these qualities because you're looking for cause and effect. In some cases, the effects come immediately on the causes, as when you stick your finger into a fire and it immediately hurts so you immediately pull it out. In other cases, though, the effects take time—as when people begin to notice after they've been meditating for quite a while that the mind is getting calmer. It doesn't react in the ways that it used to. But sometimes you don't notice that effect for weeks.

So to see cause and effect clearly, you have to learn how to be steady in your powers of observation. To do that you have to focus your mind on something that's steadily there. You've got the breath coming in and going out, and as long as you're alive it's going to be coming in and going out. So it's a good place to start. You focus on the breath going in, you focus on it coming out. After a while, you realize that in order for the mind to stay with the breath, the breath will have to be comfortable, something you like, something you enjoy doing. Otherwise, you get bored and start wandering off to other places.

So you hold that purpose in mind. You're going to explore the sensation of breathing, and try to use your powers of evaluation to see: What kind of breathing feels good right now? What kind of breathing feels good over time? The longer you stay with the breath, the more you realize that there's a lot going on in the breath. It's not just air coming in and out through the nose, but there's also a flow of energy that goes along with it. The way you conceive of the breath can help or hinder the process. If you think of energy flowing, you find that the energy flows more freely. So you remember to hold these concepts in mind: That's the mindfulness.

Then you try to develop alertness to see what's actually happening with the breath, and also the quality of ardency: You want to do this well. You want to give it your full attention. As soon as you sense anything going wrong, you want to correct it. In other words, the breath, which seemed to be comfortable with a particular rhythm that felt good, after a while is not so good any more. Well, change it. Or let it change. If you sense the mind wandering off, you bring it right back.

Then if you notice that you're getting frustrated by the fact that the mind is wandering off so much, you have to remind yourself that frustration is not helpful. You're not here to develop frustration. So try to think in other ways. Remind yourself that each time you bring the mind back to the breath, you're actually strengthening your mindfulness. You may not be happy to see how weak your mindfulness is, or how many gaps it has, but that's the way it is. You've got to start where you are.

As Ajaan Lee once said, when you start to practice, you start seeing your defilements right away. As long as you accept the fact that this is what everybody has to go through, you won't get discouraged. It's not a sign that

you're a particularly bad meditator or a hopeless meditator. It's just where you are.

I don't know how many times I've heard people say they can't meditate because their mind won't settle down. It's like saying, "I can't go to see the doctor because I'm sick." If you're sick, you've got to go see the doctor. That's the only way you're going to get over your illness. In the same way, if you find that your mind won't settle down, that means you've got to meditate—and learn the patience that's required for the meditation to do its work. This is a good quality to develop, because it will allow your mindfulness to strengthen. The stronger your mindfulness, the stronger your alertness, the more you're able to see and understand about your own mind.

This way, you're able to put the Buddha's teachings to the test to see if developing these qualities really does create a greater capacity for happiness, a greater capacity for well-being. And you can see what other qualities you need to develop in the mind. Get a sense of what's working and what's not, and under which conditions certain teachings work and certain teachings don't. An important part of the path is balance, noticing that when the mind is too sluggish, you need to gladden it. When it's too energetic, you have to make it steadier.

As the Buddha says in terms of the factors for awakening, there are the passive ones and the active ones, calming ones and energizing ones. They're all good, but they have their time and place. Meditating is like building a fire. When the fire is too weak, you put more fuel on it. You don't cover it with dust and water. But when it's too strong, you don't add more fuel. That's when you use the dust and the water. It's not that the dust and the water are always bad or always good, or that the fuel is always bad or always good. You have to learn to read the situation to see what's needed. All of these are issues that you have to keep in mind.

It's not that simply by watching things, without actively testing them, you'll immediately understand what to do. If that were the case, the Buddha's instructions would be pretty simple. Just watch and you'll understand for yourself and then you can trust yourself and everything will be okay. But he realized there's more to training the mind than just that.

This is why right view is an important part of the practice. It starts with understanding what suffering is—as in the chant just now. It says we don't discern suffering, which sounds kind of strange. After all, everybody knows

that there's suffering. It's one of the most basic facts of being aware. Being a conscious agent, we're bound to come into pain, suffering, mental suffering, physical pain. These things just right here, but we don't really discern them.

To "discern" them means to understand them. What exactly is the suffering? It's not the physical pain, it's the mental pain. That's the real suffering. And it turns out that the mental pain is not necessary. The fact that we have a body means that there are going to be pains. Once you've been born, you've signed on for aging, illness, and death even though you don't realize it. It's part of the contract. It's not even in the small print. It's there in bold letters, written out clear. Yet we tend to forget that side of the contract.

Yet that kind of pain is not the real suffering. The real suffering is the anguish in the mind. It comes from craving and ignorance. The Buddha defines this suffering as the five clinging-aggregates, which is the technical term for the fact that we try to feed on the form of the body, on our feelings, on our perceptions, on the way the mind fabricates its thoughts, and on acts of consciousness, in our attempt to find happiness.

It's like feeding on potato chips thinking that you're going to get healthy by eating them. They do offer some sustenance, but not much, and they certainly don't clear up the cholesterol in your arteries or lower your blood pressure. Yet you think this is where you're going to find happiness. But the Buddha says No. Actually, the fact that you're trying to feed on things to find happiness is the cause of the suffering. This is what he means by not discerning suffering. We see it, we feel it, but we don't really understand it.

So it helps to have some of the Buddha's insights on the matter. He points us to areas that we can look into, that we can experiment with and try to understand, so that we can see where we're causing the anguish, where we're causing the disappointment, and what we can let go of so that we don't have to suffer—and what we can develop so that we can let go.

The Buddha says that if you're going to feed on anything, feed on the pleasure that comes from a settled and concentrated mind. That's not going to be the end of suffering in and of itself, but it's the way to the end of suffering. We're following a path, and so we need food to keep going. Once the mind gets more and more still, more and more at ease in the present moment, there'll be a sense of ease, pleasure, refreshment, and that can give

us a lot of sustenance right there, so that we don't have to feed in our old ways.

The Buddha's giving us health food: good, solid, sustaining food. When we feed on it, ultimately the mind gets to the point where it doesn't have to feed and it finds a happiness that doesn't depend on conditions at all. That's the goal that he points us to. And it comes through developing these good qualities of the mind.

Now, as I said, when the Buddha talks about the good qualities of mind, some of them are appropriate for some occasions, others are appropriate for others. Mindfulness, he says is appropriate in all situations. But here he means that whole cluster of mindfulness, alertness, ardency: the qualities that go into establishing right mindfulness, because they oversee everything else.

In one analogy, he talks of mindfulness as being like a charioteer. A charioteer has to know how fast to get the horses going, and if one horse is pulling faster than the others, you have to pull that one back. In other words, the charioteer has to keep things in balance. In another analogy, the Buddha compares mindfulness to a gatekeeper at a fortress at the frontier of the kingdom. The gatekeeper has to be very careful, because the fortress might easily be infiltrated by spies and people from outside. So the gatekeeper has to be very mindful and alert to keep watch on who is coming in, and to let in only the people he knows and to keep out the people he doesn't know. As the Buddha said, with mindfulness as your gatekeeper, you develop what's skillful and you abandon what's not.

Which means that mindfulness has an important function in learning how to be wise in judging what's skillful and what's not. You bring your full presence of mind as to what's appropriate, what's not appropriate, what needs to be done in terms of the four noble truths. You want to understand suffering. You want to let go of its cause and you want to develop a path to the end of suffering, to abandon its cause so that you can realize the cessation of suffering. Those are the duties and activities that we want to keep in mind.

Again, you want to be informed so that you can judge things in an intelligent way. We're warned against being judgmental, i.e., judging things without really understanding them, just acting on our quick gut reaction, which, even though we may have plenty of nerves in our gut, can't really be

relied on. You need to educate your gut, you need to educate your mind, so that your judgments are skillful, appropriate—so that they really do help you to understand suffering and abandon its cause; they really do help you understand how to develop the path. This means that there are certain things you do have to keep in mind.

The primary set of principles to keep in mind is what the Buddha called the four noble truths: suffering, its cause, the cessation of suffering, and the path to its cessation. Keep in mind the duties appropriate to each: to understand suffering, to abandon its cause, to realize the cessation by developing that path. Those are the things you keep in mind as your standards of judgment.

We're sometimes told that mindfulness is non-judgmental. That's true in the sense that, in and of itself, just plain old mindfulness doesn't know what to judge, because plain old mindfulness could keep anything in mind. But when you train it with right view and get it properly established with the right qualities so that it becomes right mindfulness, then it becomes the crucial factor in learning how to judge things as to what's appropriate, what's inappropriate, for any particular time and place. After all, judgment is not just a matter of holding standards in mind in a general way. You have to see how they apply, right here, right now. Given this situation, given this imbalance in the mind, given this imbalance in the body, how do you bring things back into balance? The same principle applies in dealing with other people: when you need to tell one person to turn right, you need to tell another person to turn left.

There's a famous example with Ajaan Chah. One of his students once accused him of being inconsistent in his instructions. But as Ajaan Chah said, sometimes he sees a person walking down the path and the person's wandering off to the right side, so he has to say, "Go left, go left." Another person's wandering off to the left side, so he needs to say, "Go right, go right." The words differ, but the intent is the same, or comes to the same thing. This is another principle you need to keep in mind: that you have to read the situation before you know what to apply.

This is how your judgment, your powers of judgment, become well informed, so that you've got good standards of judgment and you know how to apply them to specific cases.

It's in this way that mindfulness is an important part of the faculty of judgment, but it has to be informed by the other factors of the path, in particular right view. What makes it right? Because it works. How well does it work? Well, that depends on your own powers of mindfulness, your own powers of concentration as you develop your own discernment. The Buddha gives standards for judgment and he also gives us standards for judging when our powers of judgment are really reliable or not. It's up to us to develop those qualities of mind that allow us to judge for ourselves.

The Buddha knew he was in a position where he couldn't tell people what to do against their will. And he couldn't prove many of his main points. After all, he talks about nibbana. Where is it? Where do you see it? It's not in anything he could point to. What he did depend on was the fact that people are suffering and they want to know a way to put an end to suffering. He's offering that to them: If you want to find an end of suffering, this is what you can do. What you have to do.

He was so confident that he had found the right way that he didn't try to put any constraints on other people as to whether they had to believe him or not. It's up to us to develop the powers where we can legitimately judge how accurate his teachings are, how effective they are.

This is what we're working on as we meditate, developing mindfulness, alertness, ardency, intentness, concentration, discernment, steadiness of mind: all the qualities that put us in a position where we can make accurate judgments for ourselves.

Pain Is Not the Enemy

May 23, 2012

Ajaan Suwat frequently made the point that we misunderstand things: We think that pain is our enemy and craving is our friend. We've got it backwards. Pain is not the enemy. Craving is the enemy. Even though pain may not be a pleasant person to be around, still we can learn many important things from pain. In that sense, it's our friend. But you have to understand it.

Yet here again, we have things backwards. We think we want to abandon pain. Actually, the craving is what we should abandon. The pain is something we should try to comprehend. This is one of the reasons why we get the mind into concentration, so that we can put it in a position where we can watch the pain and not feel threatened by it. As you watch it, you learn about it. You come to comprehend it.

So, focus on the breath. Get it really comfortable. Give the mind the energy it needs in order to watch the pain, to understand it.

Sometimes, at the beginning of the meditation, there's already pain in your body. This means you first have to focus instead on another area of the body where there's not so much pain and things are more pleasant, an area that may seem just neutral to begin with. But you'll often find that these neutral areas of the body—if you sit with them for a while and give them a little space, let them relax a little bit—can actually become pleasant.

The sense of pleasure, the sense of refreshment that comes from allowing the breath energy to flow well there can strengthen you. It puts you in a much better mood, so that when the time comes to look at the pain, you're ready for it.

What are you looking for when you look at it? The first thing you want to notice is the distinction between physical pain and mental pain. Physical pain is not the problem. The problem is the mental pain we create, either

around physical pain or around painful emotions. You want to learn to be able to make that distinction because it makes all the difference in the world. After all, when you finally get to the point where the mind is not in pain, that doesn't mean the physical pain is going to go away. It may still be there just as much as it was before, but there's a sense of being disjoined from it. It's in its place; the mind—your awareness—is in its place. The pain doesn't impinge on your awareness with any sense of being burdensome at all.

You want to be able to see how these things actually would normally be that way—separate—if it weren't for all the activity we engage in that pulls the pain into the mind. That's what you're going to be looking for.

A lot of that activity has to do with the perceptions we have around the pain. Number One being, of course, that the pain is our enemy, or Two, that we want to get rid of it, break through it. Or whatever perceptions you have that the pain is permanent, that it's there lodged in you, that it's not changing: You have to learn how to undo these perceptions. After all, perception is the primary factor that fashions your mind.

The Buddha identifies perception and feeling as mental fabrications, i.e., the things that create your sense of well-being or not well-being in the mind. But it turns out perception is the really big one.

So you want to look for all the different labels you have around the pain. Learn how to see it as impermanent, coming and going, coming and going. And then, even better, just going, going, going, even though it will arise again. You want to focus on its going away, going away so that you don't feel like you're in the line of fire or that you're the victim of the pain. That's one perception that's helpful.

Another approach is to look for what subconscious perceptions you may have about the shape of the pain, or your fear that if you don't clamp down on the pain it's going to spread. You want to bring those perceptions up to the surface. One way of doing that is to challenge them.

Tell yourself, "Okay, if I step back from the pain, I'll allow the pain to go all over the body if that's what it wants." And something in your mind will scream, and say "No! No, no you can't do that!" Okay, you've found that subconscious perception.

Remind yourself that often, when you clamp down on the pain, you make it worse. Your attempt at control it makes it worse. So you're here just

to watch it going away, going away, going away, so that you can notice what other perceptions are going on in the mind. Learn how to detect the level of pain in the mind itself to see how it, too, comes and goes, rises and falls. You want to look for the risings and fallings because those are the things that alert you: Has something important just changed? Something that made the pain more unbearable?

When we talk about mental feelings, it's not necessarily a matter of emotions. Sometimes it's just a thought in the mind: "I can't take this." That thought, in and of itself, places a huge burden on the mind.

Or the simple thought, "I've been sitting here with this pain for half an hour. How much longer is it going to last?" There'll be a little piercing of grief that goes with that, along with a sense again that "I can't take this." If you see those thoughts arising, remind yourself that the pain that you've been sitting through for the past half hour is not there anymore. It's gone. As for the pain in the future, that's not here, either. All you've got is just the pain right here, right now.

Any reference to time, you want to put that aside. Any reference to space, you want to put it aside. The idea that the pain is in this part of the body, the pain is in that part of the body, drop that.

Somehow we think that by locating the pain, we're working toward a solution. That's not the case. By trying to pin it down in this way, you're interfering with the flow of energy in the body, at the same time creating a perception that digs away at the mind.

You can ask yourself, "Exactly what here is painful? What is it that's actually wearing down the mind? What about the pain is so hard to bear?" Simply your ability to question things in this way gives you a little bit of distance from them, rather than just sitting in your old habits of thinking and feeling without questioning, being a burden to yourself. Your thoughts become burdens. You become a victim.

If the pain moves around, you learn how to move around, too, in the sense that you don't sit on one perception all the time. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about asking yourself, "Okay, where is the most intense spot of the pain right now?" As you chase it around for a while, you begin to realize that the idea of a most intense spot is in itself something that pains the mind. So you can drop that because you see this spot moving around. First you think

it's over there. You go running over there. No. It's not there any more. It's over someplace else.

Another way to question things is to ask, "Exactly where is the point of being burdened? What is burdening the mind right now?" As you ask these questions, they open the issue up. Again and again and again, the teachings focus on how our assumptions are creating problems, particularly our assumptions of self: our assumptions that inside this boundary line is our self, whereas outside that little boundary line, that's not self. If we look at that boundary, after a while we begin to realize that it keeps moving around. This insight allows you to understand a lot more about this process of what the Buddha calls I-making and my-making. It's not what you thought.

The same with the pain: Sometimes it's just an intense sensation, while our perception is what makes it painful. You see this with feelings of rapture. Rapture is something that affects both the body and the mind. Sometimes the sensations in the body get extremely full, so full that you feel like you're drowning. Then, when the perception comes in that you're drowning, the rapture becomes unpleasant, something you want to run away from. But if you give the sensation some space, you'll see that the sense of fullness can actually be pleasant. You search out what part of your mind or your awareness feels threatened by it and question it. Turn things around.

Or you can ask yourself, if there's a pain in one part of the body or a blockage in one part of the body: "Which side do you think you're on? Are you on the upper side? Or on the lower side?"

Many of us tend to focus our sense of where we are in the body up in the head, and the head is looking at the body as a distant thing. Or we identify with a sensation in the chest or in the heart. But learn how to question that. The center of the knower can be anywhere in the body at all. Your unexamined assumptions are what really weigh the mind down. So you want to be able to catch them, question them, pull back from them. That way, you're no longer in the line of fire.

So these are some of the things you can learn about the mind from associating with the pain and learning how to question your cravings and assumptions. In digging these things up and questioning them, you find that you can release yourself from their power. That's how insight happens.

There's no one technique that will guarantee insights. Having one technique is like those big guns they had in Singapore prior to World War II.

The British were sure the Japanese were going to come via the ocean, so they pointed all their guns out toward the ocean and set them in concrete. Then, of course, the Japanese came down the Malay Peninsula from behind the guns. The guns couldn't be turned around, and that was it. If you just hope that one technique of noting or one technique of scanning or whatever is going to do the work for you, your defilements will laugh at you because they can sneak around behind the technique and take it over for their own purposes.

You want your assumptions to be hard for the defilements to pin down, so teach the mind how to questions its assumptions. When it comes to a new insight, learn how to question that, too. You'll be a moving target, hard to hit.

You learn that a lot of the things you took to be solid and set are simply the results of activities you've been doing repeatedly, again and again and again. When you learn how to stop doing the activity, the things that seemed so solid will begin to dissolve away.

That's how we get to know the third noble truth—the cessation of suffering, the cessation of stress—which you don't have to comprehend beforehand. Just know that it's really good and it's something you can realize. Your duty is to comprehend stress and to abandon the cause by developing the path. The cessation will then happen on its own. That's when you realize it.

It's by hanging around this issue of pain, particularly the mental pain caused by craving or ignorance: That's when you realize who your true friends really are.

Pleasure & Pain

July 31, 2012

We're practicing the middle way—between indulgence in sensuality on one side and self-torture on the other—but it's best to think of the middle way as not lying on a continuum halfway between those two points. In other words, we're not here doing a little bit of pain, a little bit of pleasure, pursuing middling pleasure and middling pain. We're trying to find a state where there is no pain or pleasure. As we practice the path to that state, we're actually trying to raise ourselves above the continuum, because the continuum on one side, takes sensual pleasure as an end in itself, and the other side sees pain as being something inherently good. Instead, the Buddha wants you to use pleasure and pain for something that's even better.

We use just enough sensual pleasure to get by, in terms of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, but we don't take sensuality itself as a part of the path. We try to find a different kind of pleasure, the pleasure that comes from concentration. This, the Buddha said, is a pleasure that's blameless. In other words, it doesn't harm anybody and it doesn't fog the mind. This is a pleasure off the continuum.

The pleasure that comes from a centered and broad state of awareness actually enables you to see things more clearly. There's a lot to be learned about the mind by getting it to settle down. That's because the process of getting the mind to be concentrated, in and of itself, requires some discernment.

For example, when you're dealing with distraction, you want to figure out why the mind gets distracted, why it can lie to itself when it's about to run away and yet pretend that it's not going anywhere, that it's going to stay right here. How does that happen? Why are there these different layers in the mind? And who's fooling whom here? Can you learn to detect the points where the mind is ready to go, when it hasn't quite left the breath yet but it's on its way?

When you can do that, you've learned an important skill. You've also learned a lot of things about the layers in the mind, the layers of dishonesty:

where one side of the mind is getting ready to do something, and another side of the mind is pretending not to notice; the part that's complicit and yet would deny up and down that there's any complicity. That's what you've got to watch out for. When you learn to uncover that, you've learned some important things about the mind.

The same principle applies as you go through the various levels of concentration. You learn different ways that the mind fabricates around its object, how it relates to the sense of the body, to what extent the sense of the body is a creation. When things get very, very, very still, both in the body and in the mind, you realize that the movement of the breath energy, the subtle breath energy, through the different parts of the body is what creates your sense of where the body is. When that movement grows still, the sense of the boundary of the body begins to dissolve. You have the choice of maintaining the perception of that boundary or dropping it. You begin to see how artificial the whole thing is. That, too, gives you some important insights.

Don't think that concentration practice has to be one thing and discernment practice is something else. In the process of maintaining your concentration, you're going to learn a lot about the mind. Try to maintain the sense of being centered, having a sense of well-being inside. It's not just a dead-end path, as some people seem to say. If you learn how to use it properly, you can learn a lot about the processes of fabrication in the mind. That's what insight is all about: how the mind fabricates things—its sense of the body, its sense of the mind, how it fabricates speech as you try to carry the concentration into the day. It may not be full absorption at those times, but at least you have a center that you can try to maintain.

Like that image of the man with a bowl full of oil on his head: You try to balance this bowl of oil and you don't want to spill even a drop. Try to maintain your concentration as you go into the day, and at first you find that you're spilling it all over the place in the beginning. But don't get frustrated by that. Take it as an opportunity to learn: What are the things that cause you to spill your bowl of oil? Don't blame sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations outside. It's the movement of the mind out to those things that spills the oil. So, what does the mind want out of sights?

If you keep these questions in mind, you can learn an awful lot simply by doing your best to maintain your state of concentration. You see this flow

of the mind outside, and if you look for it enough, you'll be able to catch it at times when the flow is about ready to go, but you're not flowing with it. You can observe it as something separate. You begin to realize that your willingness to go along with the flow is what kept it alive. If you don't play along, it goes for just a short distance and then it just drops. That, too, is an important insight that can be gained from sticking with the pleasure of concentration.

So you use the pleasure. You're practicing the concentration not for its own sake, but as a tool. It gives you a sense of well-being so that you're less likely to want to run out after cheap pleasures. It also gives you a standard of measurement. When you're very, very still, you can see very subtle movements. And when you have a set intention that you carry, not only into your meditation but also into your daily life, you begin to see how that intention is knocked around by other intentions. The more you're able to resist those other intentions, the more you see through them, because that's the only way you're going to be able to resist them. You can't do it just through force of will. In the beginning, that's what maintains it: your determination. You want this to work, but it's only by seeing into how the mind deceives itself that you're really going to have any solid concentration, a solid sense of center as you go through the day.

This is how we learn to use pleasure.

As for pain, it's a similar sort of thing. We're not here to pursue pain as a good in and of itself, but it is a useful means. It's a useful tool. As the Buddha says, if you find that living by your pleasure, unskillful qualities are beginning to proliferate in your mind, you have to be willing to make the practice a little more painful. That may mean giving up certain things you like, sitting for longer periods of time, basically forcing the issue.

Now, the pain isn't going to do anything on its own. In other words, sitting with the pain doesn't burn away old kamma. Just trying to be very still in the presence of pain isn't going to burn away old kamma, either. But when you're sitting with pain, things are going to come up in the mind, and you get to see them. You're forcing the issue. Your old habits that you used to indulge very easily get frustrated by the pain. This is particularly true here in the modern world, where we're trained to be consumers, trained to have things come quickly. You want something and you just click on it, and it comes. It's good to have a few obstacles to your desires so that you can see

them. Otherwise, they blend into the background, they move under the water, and you don't have any sense of them at all.

A similar principle applies to sitting with unskillful thoughts that are causing stress or pain in the mind. Simply sitting with the thoughts and bearing with them isn't going to do anything. You have to be inquisitive, to figure out: "What is it about this thought that keeps me attracted to it?" Sometimes people think that "If I think unskillful thoughts enough, I'll see the pain, and that'll get me past them." But that's often a trick of the mind. It wants you to think the unskillful thoughts so it gives you a sense that by sitting here engaging in these unskillful thoughts, you're engaging in the path. You're not. It's very rare that intentionally pushing yourself in that direction, or allowing that to happen when you have other ways of dealing with it, really impresses upon you the fact that this kind of unskillful thinking is causing suffering. That's because the mind does have a tendency to discount the suffering because it's enjoying the unskillful thinking so much. So watch out for that.

You have to take an inquisitive attitude toward what it's doing: "What here is the pleasure in this thinking? Why am I attracted to it? Why does it capture my imagination? What about it makes me feel that it's worthwhile?" If you find you're beginning to get answers to that, then it's worth investigating. Otherwise, if no answers are coming up, it's a sign that the unskillful thinking is just going to run circles around you. You've got to get the mind still, to figure out some way of extracting yourself from that unskillful thinking, to get back to the breath.

So, again, pain is not an unmitigated good. It's a tool you have to learn how to use. When you can take this attitude both toward pleasure and pain, you find that it does lift you up above that old continuum of running back and forth between indulging in pain, indulging in sensual pleasure, and then turning around and indulging in pain again. You're learning how to cut the loop by realizing that there are other alternatives.

So often we get stuck in a situation where we think there are only two or three alternatives, and we run around the circle among them. It's good to be able to imagine that there are other alternatives totally outside of that circle. And it's often in those other alternatives, where you don't have to choose x or y, that you get released from the issue.

There are other choices out there. It's in realizing that there are those other choices: That's where the path lies.

Insight into Pain

June 5, 2010

Pain is a fact of consciousness. It's probably what distinguishes us from robots. They can have sensors, but they don't feel pain. It's our main subjective burden—which is why the Buddha's teachings are such a gift. There's a principle in postmodern thought that every attempt to teach people anything is an act of aggression, because you're trying to make them submit to your view of things, but the Buddha's teachings are a huge exception to that. He didn't force anyone to accept his teachings. He offered his teachings as therapy. You can take them and use them, or you can put them aside, pay them no mind. He didn't need anyone's approval. He didn't need to exert power over anyone because he had already found true happiness. He simply offered his teachings as a gift to the one problem that everybody shares. We don't share our pain—I don't feel your pain, you don't feel mine. When a politician says, "I feel your pain," you wonder what he's feeling. But each of us knows what pain is like, and each of us wants a solution to it.

The Buddha says that the primary reaction to pain is twofold. One is bewilderment, not understanding why it's there, where it comes from. The second one is a search: Is there anyone who knows a way or two to get rid of this pain? Particularly with animals and young children who can't speak yet, there's not much comprehension. There's the sensation of pain, the definite feeling of pain, but there's a huge question that goes along with it: "Why? Why? What is this? Why, why is this happening?" That's the bewilderment. As we begin to find that there are other people who can help assuage our pain—starting with our mother and father—we start looking outside. There are some pains they can take care of, but there are a lot of things that they can't. So we look to other people beyond them.

The Buddha is there to fill in that gap, because bewilderment often leads to really mistaken ideas—looking to the wrong people, taking up the wrong ideas about how pain can be overcome. The Buddha is here to give us his expert advice. He's like a doctor—but not one who simply gives you a shot.

He's like an old-fashioned herbal doctor who gives you a prescription. It's up to you to find the herbs, make them into medicine, and take it. You also adjust your life: avoiding certain foods, eating other foods, avoiding certain activities, exercising in certain ways. In other words, the actual treatment is up to you. The Buddha's not going to take the pain away for you, but he does tell you what you can do to overcome the suffering.

In particular, he talks about two kinds of pain, two kinds of suffering. There's the pain in the three characteristics and there's the pain or suffering in the four noble truths. The pain in the three characteristics is something universal. Wherever there's a process of fabrication where conditions come together to create other conditions, there's going to be stress. There's stress inherent in the fact that things arise and pass away, and that their coming together cannot be permanent—but that's not the suffering that weighs down the mind. The extent to which it does weigh down the mind comes from the fact that we have craving. The craving is what really weighs us down. That weight is the suffering, the pain in the four noble truths. That's the one that we can do something about. That's the optional suffering. The path to put an end to that suffering is the noble eightfold path, or the threefold training: virtue, concentration, and discernment.

Virtue here starts with our activities in terms of speech and physical activities, but it points to something inward and important: that those activities are based on our intentions. There are several purposes for this aspect of the practice. One is that if you harm others, it's going to be hard for you to practice. The karmic retribution creates difficulties. Then there's the regret in the mind when you realize you've harmed someone else or harmed yourself. As the mind is trying to settle down in concentration, that becomes a thorn, makes it hard to settle down. Training in virtue is a way of avoiding those difficulties.

At the same time, training in virtue is also training in mindfulness, training in alertness, training in compassion. In other words, you're developing good qualities of mind. As you do this, you're getting very sensitive to your intentions because the intention is what determines whether you're breaking a precept or not. We go through life being so ignorant of our intentions and covering them up with denial, especially the unskillful ones. When you ask someone why they did something, often they have to stop and think for a little while and reconstruct it. They weren't

really there as the decisions were being made. The lower-level functionaries in their nervous system were making the decisions when the boss was AWOL. The precepts try to make you more and more present in the decision-making, more present to your intentions, more sensitive to the results of your actions.

Then the same principle gets carried into the mind. When you're practicing concentration, you want to be very clear that this is an action, this is an activity you're doing. You're thinking and evaluating one object. You hold a perception in mind. As the Buddha said, the levels of concentration are a series of perception attainments, all the way from the first jhana up through the dimension of nothingness. At each level, there's a perception you hold in your mind, a mental label you apply to your object. That's the action. That's what keeps you in touch with the object, such as the breath. There are many things that you could be sensitive to in your awareness of the body right now, but the Buddha's asking that you be sensitive to the breath, the in-and-out breath and the other breath energies in the body. You try to stay tuned to that level of awareness, that aspect of having a physical body sitting here.

When the Buddha talks about being aware of the body, he's also getting you to be aware of the four properties: the wind property, the fire property, the water property, and the earth property. These are all aspects of how you sense the body from within. The wind is the energy or motion. Earth is the solidity, fire the warmth, and water the cool sensations that go with the flow of the blood through the body, for example. As you focus on that aspect of your body, you find that there are also feelings of pain or pleasure. It's important that you learn how to distinguish those pain and pleasure sensations from the four properties, because otherwise they get glommed together, especially with the earth, the solid aspect of the body. When there's a pain, you tend to glom it on with the solid sensations, which makes the pain seem solid, too.

Here's an area where you can get some important insights into how perceptions can create problems, because the perception of the pain has glued the pain to the solid sensations of the body, making the pain seem a lot more solid than it has to be. This is an area where, once you start getting concentrated, you can stay with the sense of the body and not keep flying off to other mental worlds. You want to start making distinctions: which

sensations are the earth sensations, which ones are the sensations of water, fire, breath or wind, and then which sensations are the pain sensations? They're different things.

When you can see that distinction, learning how to apply different labels to those different sensations, that takes a huge burden off the mind right there. That way, even though there can be pain in the body, the mind doesn't have to be pained by it. You begin to see that the perception is the bridge between the physical pain and the sense of suffering or being burdened in the mind. How does this create craving? Because we lay claim to the body, the whole mass here is "us" or "ours." Then as soon as the pain comes in, our territory has been invaded. We have a sense of the pain as aiming at us. It's trying to do something to us, trying to move in on our territory.

If you can practice changing that perception and holding different perceptions of what's going on, there can still be pain, but it's not invading your space. When you're not trying to take possession of that territory, you're not opening yourself up to attack. That's another level of perception that you want to be able to distinguish: that when you're aware of something, you also tend to take possession of it. However, it's possible to be aware without having that sense of possession, just as you're aware of the mountain over there on the horizon, the sun on the mountain, the trees, the chaparral. You look at them and you're aware of them, but there's no sense of possession. They're not yours. As long as mountains and the chaparral don't do anything to invade your space, there's no suffering.

If you went out and tried to take possession of Mount Palomar or Mount Pala, there would be problems, but as long as you don't take possession of them, there's no problem. Try to learn how to apply that same principle to your sense of inhabiting the body. You can be here, but there doesn't have to be a you inhabiting it. There's just this sense of the body that you're aware of.

Now, to see the movements of the mind as it's applying these perceptions to things, creating the bridges that allow stress to come into the mind: that requires a lot of stillness, which is why the Buddha said that genuine insights require really strong concentration. You can have insights about other things without much concentration—you see little movements in the mind here and there in kind of a random way. The insights that really go deep into the mind, that really have an important impact in freeing the

mind, are the insights that come from seeing how you're trying to take control of something so that you can gain pleasure out of it but instead it turns around and it bites you. Those are the insights that are really important, that make a big difference. For those you have to be very quiet, because that movement of trying to take over something so that you can feel that you're in control of it, convinced that it can lead you to happiness and pleasure: It's so instinctive, so under the radar. There's such an of-courseness about it—of course you'd think that this is your body, of course you'd feel this way, of course you'd have those perceptions—that it's really hard to catch.

This is an important aspect of insight: learning how to see things with new eyes, getting out of your old habits of looking at things and understanding things, and then turning around and looking at those old habits from outside them: Oh my gosh, they really do cause a lot of unnecessary suffering and stress.

An important aspect of concentration practice is learning to get out of your old habits. Instead of thinking about things as you normally do or focusing on things as you normally would, try to hold on to your perception of the breath regardless. The mind may say, "This is stupid; you're not getting any insights," but you can say, "Sorry, whether it's stupid or not, I don't care. I'm just going to keep on doing this." You're here to learn something new. As the Buddha said, you're practicing to realize what you haven't realized before, to attain what you haven't attained before—and that means you have to do things you haven't done before.

So you stick with the breath regardless of how tempting it is to go thinking about other things, focusing on other things. You stay right here, stay right here, stay right here. Develop the strength of mind that can stick with something regardless. The image Ajaan Fuang used was of a red ant. In Thailand they have these big red ants that bite so tenaciously that if you try to pull them off, sometimes their heads detach before they're willing to let go. He said that that's the kind of tenacity you want as you're sticking with the breath, because it rearranges things in the mind, rearranges priorities. The part of the mind that says, "I'd like to think about this other thing; I want to think about that other thing," you have to say no to it: "No, no, no, just stay right here." In doing that, you get the mind out of its normal conversations, its normal ways of doing things and approaching things.

Only when you get out of your normal way can you turn around and look at your normal way and get some perspective on it, to see that even though the pains of conditions are a normal part of the world, the suffering that the mind takes on is totally optional. It's because of our own lack of skill that we suffer.

This is why discernment is so important to see the distinctions between things that we otherwise glom together—glomming the pain onto the solid parts of the body, glomming the sense of "me" onto that pain in the solid parts of the body—so that it's all a big sticky mess. When you learn how to distinguish things, make distinctions, see the differences—say, that a feeling of pleasure or pain is not the same thing as a sense of solidity, or that being aware of the body doesn't mean that you have to lay claim to the body—there can be a sense of separation for the mind and its object. When you can see these distinctions, that's how release comes.

The threefold training is not the end of the story. The end of the story is in what the Buddha called the four noble dhammas: virtue, concentration, discernment, and release. These four noble dhammas give a more complete picture of what we're about here. We're here for release. You recognize discernment as being genuine discernment when it brings release. You see something you didn't see before, you understand something you didn't understand before, and in the understanding, there's a release from suffering. That's the kind of insight we're looking for. Other insights may be useful along the way, but you don't want to stop with them. This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Fuang said not to go around memorizing your insights all the time, because if the insight is genuine, it brings freedom right there. It does something. It's not just information. It's an insight that makes a difference, serves a purpose, accomplishes something. That's when the discernment is noble and leads to noble release.

Take the One Seat

November 22, 2012

I was reading a guide to breath meditation tonight. The author's recommendations were that if you focus on the breath, you shouldn't try to control it, but if you find yourself controlling the breath, don't try to control the controlling. That was where I put the book down.

The mind, by nature, acts. Every time you breathe in, breathe out, there's an intentional element there. Every time you look at anything, listen to anything, smell, taste, touch, think about things, there's always an intentional element. In the practice, there has to be an intentional element, too. And you have to be very upfront about it. If you don't want to control the breath or control the controlling, you put yourself in a real bind. If the ideal is to be totally passive or totally receptive, it gets more and more difficult to practice. If you're upfront about the fact that, yes, this is a doing, this is an activity, then you can watch: When you focus this way, what are the results? When you focus that way, what are the results? When you breathe this way, when you breathe that way, what are the results? You learn by doing and observing. If something doesn't come out well, you turn around and do it again, changing things a little bit. You get to watch the mind in action.

This is probably the most important skill you need as a meditator: watching your own mind as it's making choices, and then looking at the results. When you can watch that, you can begin to gain a sense of what works and what doesn't work, what's skillful and what's not, where the different pains and sufferings you're dealing with come from. Then you can do something about them.

The problem is the fact that the mind is constantly creating trouble for itself. The trouble isn't out there in other people, situations outside. I mean, those are troublesome enough, but the real trouble is the trouble the mind makes for itself. It'll take things outside and bring them in to compound the trouble. But the trouble is right here.

Now, the solution is not to do nothing at all. After all, even the choice not to do anything is a kind of doing, and in the meantime, you don't learn any

skills. As long as the mind is going to be making choices, you want to teach it to make skillful choices. You do that by watching it.

Getting the mind into concentration is a very good way of learning how to watch it. You need mindfulness to stitch together your moments of awareness, moments of attention, so that they become continuous. Mindfulness is the ability to remember you've got to stay with the breath. Alertness is what watches the breath. As you settle down with the breath, you notice there are a lot of other things right next to the breath: all the activities of the mind.

Ajaan Chah has a nice image. He says it's as if you have a room. There's one chair in the room, and you sit in the chair. Other things will come in, and you watch them, but you don't let them sit in the chair. I was reading someone's interpretation of this passage where they said: "It's basically just a matter of sitting and watching the grand show." But no, it's not watching the grand show. You're making sure that nobody else comes in and takes your chair. Then you can watch what comes into the room and figure out what they're doing: what the mind is doing that's skillful, that's not skillful, and what you can do about it. If greed comes in and takes over the chair, or if grief comes in and takes over the chair, or anger, or any of the other emotions: If they take over the chair, then you're down on the floor. Or if there's a squabble over who gets to sit in the chair, you're not an observer anymore. So you stay right here and don't let anybody push you or lure you out of the chair.

There's a series of famous stories in Thailand about Sri Thanonchai, the Thai trickster. He was famous for playing tricks on the king, usually involving puns. But my favorite story of the group is one that involves no pun at all. Sri Thanonchai is down in the river; the king is standing on the bank. The king has had enough of these tricks that Sri Thanonchai has been playing on him. He says, "You think you're so smart, but there's nothing you can do to get me to go down into the river." Sri Thanonchai stops and thinks for a minute and then says, "You know you're right. But if you were down in the river, I could make you get out." The king says, "Oh yeah?" And goes down into the river. Then he stands there and says: "Okay, what are you going to do to make me get out of the river?" Sri Thanonchai says, "Well, I got you down into the river already. Whether you get out or not is your own business."

This is the way it is so often with our mind. We think we're going to meditate, but something comes along and lures us off the chair. So don't fall for the tricks the mind can play on you. If something else claims to be more important, or whatever the trick may be the mind has to play on you, don't leave the chair. You want to stay there so you can watch. You're in the position of power. That's what it means to be in the chair, not that you're just watching the show. You're exerting your intention to be watching these things and not to get pulled into their games. You've got your purpose in being here, which is to understand what's going on, so that you can do it more skillfully.

Otherwise, the mind, left to its own devices, can create huge amounts of suffering. You sit around with nothing else to do and you can think up all kinds of horrible stories about the past or the future, and then you burn yourself with them. What does that accomplish? Nothing at all. We all want happiness and, for some reason, we take our ability to shape our experience and we shape it in the wrong way, away from happiness. That's what you want to watch.

One way of knowing how you're shaping it the wrong way is to try very intentionally to shape it in a skillful way. In some cases, you'll find that it's easy; in others, it's hard. Okay, when you know it's hard, that's when you've run up against something. So it's not a reason to be disheartened. You've actually found something important; the mind has a habit you haven't been watching carefully enough, that you're not alert enough to. You have to be able to stand back and watch the mind in action. You figure out: "What is this obstacle? What am I letting get in the way of the practice?"

In many ways, we have a really ideal place to practice here. There are little irritants, but the problem is that, for most of us, we don't let them stay little. We can make them huge, to the point where you can't stay here anymore. To make them smaller again, you've got to step back and watch the mind's habits.

It's useful to have a sense of humor about this. This ability to step back is actually very directly related to humor, because a sense of humor comes from what? The ability to step back from a situation and see what's ironic or paradoxical about it, what about it doesn't make sense. All too often, when you're in a situation, you don't see the larger pattern. This is why really wise people have a really wise sense of humor. Not silly or vicious, the way most

people's senses of humor are. Why is it wise? Because they can step back from their own actions and see the irony in the fact that here they are trying to create happiness, and yet they're creating suffering very earnestly.

So when you take this chair, the one chair in the room, sitting back and watching things, be very careful that your thoughts don't move in and push you out of the chair or lure you out of the chair. That way, you can watch them in action and figure out: "What exactly am I doing here? Where's the misunderstanding? What is the link that I'm not seeing that's causing me to create suffering? Why do I find it so delicious? Why do I find it so entertaining to create suffering?" That's what you've got to look for.

As I said, one of the best ways of seeing these things is by trying to do something else: doing something you know is meant to create genuine happiness. This is why we have a path. This is why we have instructions on the qualities to develop on the path, so that you have something to measure the other actions in your mind against. Being on the path is what pulls you back from your ordinary habits. There's a lot of energy in the mind that resists. It can find reasons why right concentration, or right mindfulness, or right effort, or whatever, is not really right for you.

It's only when you begin to realize that the path is the standard, and your old habits are the things to be called into question: That's when you're firmly in the one seat. You can understand the path intellectually, but you have to actually see it when you're holding on very tightly to an old habit in spite of your understanding. When you can see that in action, that's when you're really making progress: when you're putting the mind in the right position for putting an end to its ignorance.

It's not a matter of doing nothing. There's a lot that you have to do in the meditation. Even though, in the beginning, you may not be doing it all that skillfully, the fact that you're doing it and you know you're doing it, is what allows you to develop the skill. The mind is active, and your discernment has to be active as well, in order to outsmart all your active old habits.

Strengthening Conviction

January 1, 2012

Meditating, strengthening the mind, is very similar to strengthening the body. You have some strength to begin with, and you use that strength to develop further strength. In Thai, the word for exercising is awk kamlang, which means to put forth energy. And in putting it forth, you gain something in return. In the same way, as you meditate, you have to use what strengths you already have if you're going to gain further strength.

There are five strengths altogether in the standard list: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. The fact that conviction comes first shows that it's important. As one of my teachers in Thailand once said, you notice that the list leading up to discernment doesn't start with concepts or ideas. It starts with conviction. Discernment comes from conviction—provided, of course, that it's conviction in the right things.

Traditionally, this means conviction in the Buddha's awakening, that it's not just one of those facts out there in history. It's a fact with implications for what you're doing right here and right now: the idea that someone, through his efforts, could find true happiness. Also, his ability to find that happiness was based on the qualities of mind that were not peculiar to him. They're qualities that we all have, to at least some extent, in a potential form. The implication there, of course, is that if he can do it, you can do it, too. Because he found this way and was expert in gaining that freedom, you treat his words the way you would treat an expert's words. Not necessarily something that you're forced to believe, you simply trust that because he knew what he was doing, his explanations of how to do it deserve some special respect.

There are a lot of implications to having conviction in the Buddha's awakening. Of course, there's going to be a part of the mind that resists this. After all, his story could be just one of those many stories that come from the past—and we've heard lots of those—and maybe it wasn't transmitted

properly. Maybe the principles that he said were universal actually applied only in his culture.

There are lots of ways that we can develop doubts and uncertainty about the path. So let's look at how the Buddha said to deal with uncertainty.

First, of course, you ask yourself: What are you being asked to believe?

You're being asked to believe that your actions have an impact.

That the quality of the mind with which you act is going to have an impact on the results of that action.

That it's possible to learn from your mistakes.

And that you do have freedom of choice.

These are all fairly commonsensical propositions. Where the Buddha is asking you to take this a little bit further than normal common sense, of course, is that by following this principle you can go all the way to true happiness, a happiness that won't change.

The first principle, that your actions have an impact, is very easy to accept. That's why we act to begin with. Still, though, it's interesting: There's part of the mind that, many times, would rather that its actions not have results, especially when you know you're doing something unskillful. You have to ask yourself: What is the state of mind that would want to doubt these things? Is it a state of mind that you can trust?

Sometimes that state of mind is just a matter of your own defilements: your own greed, your own aversion, your own laziness, your own delusion. Sometimes those attitudes are fortified by ideas we've picked up from our culture.

There's an awful lot in Western culture that goes against the Dhamma. It teaches you that greed is good, that true happiness is impossible, that the happiness that can be bought is good enough. It teaches you that if you don't follow your sensual desires, you'll end up twisted and mentally unbalanced.

There's a lot in Western culture, that feeds on our greed, aversion, and delusion, that encourages our greed, aversion, and delusion. Like that cartoon in The New Yorker several years ago: A man is standing in front of a magazine rack, and the names of the magazines are all the seven deadly sins. Or like the billboard that used to be on I-15 North: "Las Vegas—seven deadly sins, one convenient location." Our culture encourages these things.

When you start to have doubts about the practice or become uncertain about the practice, you have to ask yourself: Whose values are speaking? And what's the quality of the mind that's speaking here? You want to step back from these things. It's not that you don't listen to your doubts at all, but you do want to figure out which doubts are coming from honest uncertainty, and which are coming from other agendas. Which of these voices do you want to identify with?

Of course, there's the simple doubt of not knowing, but you also have to realize that if you wait for true knowledge, absolute, certain knowledge to come to you on a platter, you're going to die first. We live in a world of uncertainties. We have to take gambles as to what effort will be worth expending to get a reward—in terms of pleasure, well-being, satisfaction—that's commensurate with the effort we put in. This is a part of human life that makes us uncomfortable. Most of us don't like to think about how much we're taking on faith as we go through the day. Even just believing that the world is going to go on as it has been: There's no guarantee.

You have to realize that there's always going to be an element of uncertainty as you make choices in life. This is where you have to balance what seems to be a safe choice as opposed to an unsafe one, a likely choice as opposed to an unlikely one, a noble choice as opposed to an ignoble one. When you look at the Buddha's teachings, they fit all the right criteria: They're safe, noble, and likely. It's likely, for example, there is a pattern to the principle of cause and effect. Even if it doesn't work out that that is the way things are, when you've followed the Buddha's instructions for exploring this issue, you've developed good qualities in the present moment. There's a certain sense of satisfaction coming from that, a certain sense of nobility that you've acted on your higher impulses rather than on your lower ones.

You have to be willing to commit to some things before you learn any undeniable truth. This is a principle that Ajaan Lee repeats over and over again: that you have to be true in order to find truth. You have to say: "I'm really going to give myself to this particular course of action, this particular way of approaching life, and then see what comes out as a result." You have to give it time; you have to give it energy. Without expending the energy, you're not going to get the strength of conviction in return.

So you look around. Who are the people who followed this path in the past? In my own case, one of the things that really convinced me that this is

something worth looking into was meeting Ajaan Fuang. I remember when I had first learned about Buddhism, the idea that someone could practice to be free of greed, aversion, and delusion sounded like practicing to be a dead person. It didn't sound attractive at all. But then, in meeting Ajaan Fuang, I met someone who had devoted his life to the path. He was very alive, very alert, very wise. He inspired a lot of trust. And as he said, this wasn't how he had started in life. He said he owed it all to the training.

I compared him to the other people I'd known, other possible ways I could live my life, and his seemed the most likely to show good results. It was a risk with a lot of uncertainties, but I felt inspired by his example.

This is why it's good to read the stories of the ajaans, people in the recent past who have given their lives to the practice. Sometimes it's easier to relate to people who live closer to us in time—although if you read the Theragatha and Therigatha, you realize that the problems people face in training their minds are not so different now from what they were back around the Buddha's time.

You look at the life of those who have practiced and then you give it a good try. Notice which qualities of the mind the Buddha says are unskillful, which are skillful. Learn to recognize the skillful ones, recognize the unskillful ones in your own mind, so you can develop skillful ones and abandon the unskillful ones, and see what happens.

This is not the sort of thing that you just try on weekends. You ask yourself: If you don't give yourself to this kind of life, this kind of practice, this kind of belief, what kind of belief are you giving yourself to? What habits are you training yourself in? We don't usually think about that. We just live our ordinary lives and don't particularly think of it as a training in any way, but maybe we're training ourselves in laziness or complacency. Maybe we're training ourselves in an unwillingness to commit. Is that something you want to train in?

What it comes down to is the fact that we're always making choices. All too often we don't really realize what we're choosing. At the very least, this question—"Do you want to place your faith in the Buddha's awakening?"—forces you to realize that you already are making choices, you already are training the mind in one direction or another. Then the question becomes: Is it the direction that you want to go? What kind of hope does that direction hold out? The Buddha's direction holds out the hope that maybe there really

is a true happiness that's not dependent on conditions, that's not going to leave you because of aging, illness, or death. If you want to find out if that is a genuine possibility, there's only one way to do it: Do whatever the path requires. That's the only way you're going to know.

Do you want to know this? Whether this is true or not? That's what it comes down to. Or are there other things you'd rather know? Things that strike you as more important? More desirable? That's the kind of question we all have to ask ourselves. The problem is that, all too often, we pretend that the question has already been answered without our having to do anything, without our having to put anything out, to expend any energy or any effort. Yet we're always putting energy into something. Why not put it into something that holds out the promise of something special?

This is one way of overcoming your doubts: seeing when you put energy into something and asking yourself what kind of results you're getting. Are they the kind of results that you want? Are they commensurate with the energy you're putting into them? What kind of happiness would really satisfy you? What vision would you like to have for the possibilities of human life? If it includes the possibility of a true happiness, then this is the path that works. If you just listen to the words, you won't know. But this is the path that provides that possibility. It's up to you to decide whether you want to test it or not—keeping in mind Ajaan Lee's words: that it's through being true that we find the truth.

Perceptions of the Breath

March 23, 2010

To bring the mind to the breath, you need to have a perception—a label or a picture in mind—as a way of reminding yourself where you want to stay, and exactly what topic you're focusing on. That's because all the states of concentration up to the dimension of nothingness are called perception attainments. You need a perception to stay concentrated on them.

As you work with the breath, you find that different perceptions work at different times. You'll also find that some are useful and some are actually obstacles to getting the mind to settle down.

A few helpful perceptions are these. One, remember that the breath is energy, it's not just air coming in and out of the lungs. The air can be held, as when you hold your breath, but the energy of the breath can't be held. It can be blocked, but you don't really hold it. So even as you're holding the air in your lungs, there will be a flow of breath energy in different parts of the body. This means that when we focus on the breath as energy, we're focusing on something that's very light, very quick, and very pervasive.

It also helps to think about the breath as something that comes in and out of the body very easily. Even when you've got a stuffy nose or congestion from a cold, there's still a subtle energy coming into different parts of the body. It's like working around a traffic jam: If you know that the traffic is congested on a main street, you drive through the side streets.

You can think about the breath just waiting to come in at any time, so you don't have to pull it in.

At the same time, you don't want to squeeze it out. Sometimes when your out-breath is too long, you end it off with a little squeeze. That doesn't really help. As you breathe out, you want to keep all your breath channels open so that when the body is ready to breathe in again, they'll be open, just waiting for the in-breath. If you squeeze things out, there's a tightening up and then you have to loosen that up before the breath is going to come in again. That gets in the way of allowing a sense of fullness to develop in the

breath energy. Even though you're focusing on the in-and-out breath you don't want to develop the habit of trying to create a very clear marker between the in-breath and the out-breath. They're all part of one element, and the element is continuous through time.

If you can think of the body as a large sponge or some other porous material, with lots of breath channels all over the place and then just hold that perception in mind, see how the body responds.

These perceptions are means by which one part of your mind communicates with another part of your mind. The Pali word saññā, perception, took on an additional meaning when it was adopted into Thai. There it can also mean an agreement—as when you create a language for the mind to talk to itself, and agree that certain words or images have certain meanings. So if one part of the mind asks another part of the mind, "Okay, where are we?" You'd say, "We're right here with the breath." "And where is the breath?" "It's all around you." It's helpful sometimes to think of coming to an agreement with yourself that from now on, as you breathe in and breathe out, you're going to regard every sensation in the body as a type of breath sensation. Even things that feel solid—think of them as just a blockage in the breath.

Here again, where there's a blockage, try to find a way around it. Either think of it as a blockage that's more porous than you first imagined or, if that doesn't help, ask yourself: Where are the other channels around it? How can you bypass it? Where are the side streets? If the main interstate is blocked, maybe you can find some side streets where you can get through, where the traffic isn't so heavy.

I was talking last week to a number of people who said they had trouble getting their heads around the idea of breath energy in the body. Actually, it's something you already feel, just that you don't yet label it as "breath." It's not something that you have to create. There's a technical term for this: proprioception, your sense of the body as felt from within—where it is, what you posture is, where the different parts of the body are. From the Buddha's perspective, that's "form." Breath is an aspect of form.

In fact, it's the most important of the various properties that constitute form. There's earth, water, wind, fire—or solidity, liquidity, energy, warmth. Don't think of them as foreign concepts. Think of them as a useful way of

looking at something you already sense: where the body is disposed, how it's disposed.

It's especially helpful to think of the primary experience of the body as being one of breath. It's through the breath that you sense the other elements. Instead of holding the perception that the body is a solid that you've got to squeeze or force the breath through, perceive your sense of the body as primarily energy. The breath is already there, prior to the solidity. It's how your awareness relates to the body in its most direct terms.

So there's nothing you have to force, nothing you have to move around much. Just allow things to happen. If you find that there's a spot of tension, allow the tension to relax and you'll find whatever energy was blocked by the tension will move on its own. You don't have to push it. You don't have to order it around.

Ajaan Fuang would sometimes talk about filling up the body with breath energy, but he didn't mean filling it up with air. What he meant, basically, was that when you breathe out, you don't squeeze things out. You may help it breathe in, but if the body is going to breathe out, you allow it to breathe out on its own. You don't have to give it any help. Then you breathe in again. If there's any help, you help it with the in-breath, and the out-breath will take care of itself.

After a while, as you do this, the sense of breath energy in the body will grow stronger. Sometimes it's possible to have too much. It can make you light-headed. When that's the case, you don't have to help the in-breath any more. Allow it to come in and go out on its own. Or you can simply think, "earth," to give things some grounding. Think of the excess energy flowing out your eyes, the palms of your hands, or the soles of your feet. Here again, you can work with the power of perception, because these pictures we hold in mind really do color the way we experience things.

What we're learning as meditators is how to use that power of perception in a way that's helpful. What perception of the breath allows you to settle down? You have to explore. And "exploring" here means using your imagination and then trying things out, and over time learning to get a sense of what's working and what's not—along with what standards you need to use in order to judge what's working and what's not. When the mind's settling down with a sense of mental solidity where it feels at home, feels strong, effortlessly strong, you know you're heading in the right

direction. If you're feeling strung out, you're pushing things too much in the wrong direction. We're not here to bring the mind to the brink. We're here to let it settle down, right in the center of things where everything is solid and well supported.

The process of meditation is a process of experimentation, trying out different perceptions to see which ones allow the mind to gather around. As we mentioned earlier today, the mind is very much like a committee. Some perceptions will attract some members of the committee and other perceptions will attract others. You want to find a perception that gathers in the calm, solid, alert factions of the mind, the factions that really do want to put an end to suffering and are willing to do what's needed. As they get stronger, you find you'll attract other factions of the mind to your cause as well.

Find which perceptions are useful, which perceptions are easy to hold in mind, that allow you to stay with the breath and feel grounded in the breath, not only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed but also as you're moving around. When you're moving around, you may want to focus simply on a smaller area of the body. Try to choose an area that tends to be sensitive to your emotional reactions, so that you can know quickly if something's happening in the mind. It might be in the area of the heart, in the chest, the stomach, right at the throat. That way, you'll be sensitive to when something has happened and you can deal with it immediately. If you can keep that area calm, open, settled, then it helps to take care of a lot of the other parts of the body as well. It prevents things from building up in an unstable or unbalanced way.

But essentially, it's all part of your mind's own conversation. As the Buddha said, two of the factors of the first jhana—directed thought and evaluation—are verbal fabrications, the way the mind talks to itself. As you get the mind to settle down, there doesn't have to be a lot of conversation. It can be like the conversation between people who know each other very well. One or two words is enough: "breath, body, full body." Each is a mental picture. The sentences get boiled down to single words, single images. See how long you can keep that conversation going, and keep it on track, on topic. That's how the mind gathers around and settles into even deeper concentration—not because you force it down, but because you're providing a comfortable place where everything can settle snugly into place.

The Power of Perception

November 9, 2009

There is a Pali word, nimitta, which is often translated as "sign," meaning a visual image that appears in your meditation. But that's not how it's used in the Canon. In the Canon, Sister Dhammadinna said—and the Buddha confirmed what she said—that the four nimitta of right concentration are the four frames of reference or four establishings of mindfulness: keeping track of the body in and of itself, keeping track of feelings in and of themselves, keeping track of the mind in and of itself, keeping track of mental qualities in and of themselves. Those are the targets of your meditation. Those are what you take as your theme. You maintain that theme by having a perception. As the Buddha said, that's how we get from the very beginning levels of concentration, all the way up to the perception of nothingness. The power of perception takes you pretty far.

You hold a label in your mind and apply it to what you're experiencing. The label can be a mental picture, a feeling, a word, or even just a kinetic sense that you have of the breath in the body. In other words, you might have a mental picture of how the breath goes into the body. Or you may create a particular feeling through the breath. You can focus on a point someplace around the middle of the chest and find a quality of feeling there that feels nice. You try to maintain that niceness, that pleasant feeling, so that nothing in the in- breath and nothing in the out-breath touches it or disturbs it.

This is where the Buddha's image of holding a baby chick in your hand comes in handy. You gently hold that nice feeling all way through the in-breath, and all the way through the out-breath, adjusting your breathing so that it doesn't disturb the feeling. Or you can just keep in mind the word "breath," "breath," "breath," as a way of reminding yourself not to leave the breath, when something else comes up. Or the general feeling you have of the breath coursing through the body: That can be your perception, your mental label. But to stay with the breath, you need a label of some kind. It can be one of these, or something else.

Your ability to keep that labeling in mind is where mindfulness comes in. At the same time, the label is what mindfulness needs as a sign to remember. That's how mindfulness works together with the perception. These two qualities of perception and mindfulness help each other along.

As you get them more and more stable, you can stay more consistently with the breath. This gives you an important lesson: the power that perception has in shaping your experience. The English word, "perception," is an awkward word to use, because it has two very distinct meanings. One is just basically registering sense data, as in being able to register data at the senses. The other is the label you put on something, identifying something, such as perceiving a dog to be a dog. The second meaning is what's meant here. When there are feelings in the body, you can perceive them as breath feelings or you can perceive them as solid feelings. Your choice of perception will have an effect on what you can actually do with those sensations. There are things you can do with breath sensations that you can't do with solid sensations. So perceiving them as breath sensations expands your range of possibilities.

This is why it's useful to hold in mind the idea that whatever you're experiencing in your inner sense of the body is related to the breath, either the in-and-out breath, or else the breath energy field that's more in the background. If you think of the body as being a solid lump and you've got to pump the breath into it, that'll affect the way you breathe, affect the level of pleasure you can get out of the breath. It restricts a lot of your possibilities. But if you think of the whole body as a breath energy field, you can breathe in and out of various places that you might not have thought of before: breathing out of the sides of your rib cage; thinking of the breath coming in from the left and the right as you breathe in and going out the chest you breathe out. Or you can breathe in and out of the shoulders, in and out of the eyes.

See if there's someplace in the body that you've never thought of as breath before, and experiment with it: As you breathe in, think of the breath energy coming in right there. You don't have to pull it from anywhere else. It just comes straight in through the skin. Notice which parts of the body, when you do this, have an especially good effect on how you experience the breathing, so that it feels more fulfilling, as opposed to struggling to get the breath in or to move the breath around. The breath energy is already there,

and it's simply a matter of nourishing it, filling up a little bit. You may find that you have a tendency to over-define where the different parts the body are, or over-define the edges of the breath, so loosen that up a bit. Think of the body as a field of energy and the breath can move around in places you might thought of being impossible before.

Now, you might say, "What's all this playing around doing here? Aren't we supposed to be here just accepting things as they are?" Well, part of learning about things as they are is beginning to realize that you're shaping a lot of what you thought was just "as they are," just a given in your experience. If everything were already given, already determined, you'd really be hampered. You'd really be constricted. You'd have no effect on the present at all. But that's not the way things are. If you perceive things that way, you're going to miss out on a lot of what you're actually doing. A lot of mental actions are happening behind the scenes that you might be missing.

Open up the mind to the idea that you're actually shaping things here. The best way to actually see that in action is to consciously work on shaping the way you perceive things, these labels, these images you hold in your mind as they relate to the breath. You begin to see in action what the Buddha was talking about, which is that if you're going to have an actual perception, an actual feeling of the form of the body, or the feeling tones of pleasure or pain, you have to fabricate them from the raw material coming from your past. These things exist in a potential form, coming in from your past kamma, which places some limitations on the range of your choices. But to actually have a feeling, actually have a perception, requires an intention, a sankhara, a fabrication that occurs in the present moment.

These aggregates the Buddha talks about are activities. There's an intentional element in them. Really to accept what's going on doesn't mean just accepting them as a given. It means accepting the fact you've had a hand in shaping them. You want to see that in action. If you don't see that in action, you've got a huge blind spot here in the present moment. And it's not just a spot. It's an enormous field of blindness surrounding what you think is happening, and which the mind is disguising from itself. The fact is, what's hidden by that field of blindness is precisely what you need to know to gain release.

To work through that blind field, ask yourself: What perception are you holding in mind regarding the breath? When you breathe in, what do you

think is happening? What image do you have?—whether it's a kinetic image, a visual image, or just a word. What would happen if you could change that image in a way that allows the breath to move in areas that have been restricted before? If you find a particular perception that helps you settle down more firmly, with greater sense of well-being, solidity, and resilience here in the present moment, then use that perception as long as it's skillful. If you come across something that gets even better results, use that one, too. Realize that, as a meditator, you should have lots of different tools at hand. There's no one right tool that you can use without having to evaluate it. You can't just put the mind through the meat grinder to get what you want out of the other end. There's no one guaranteed method that can do all the work. After all, do you have only one defilement? Do your defilements have only one trick, one strategy? They have lots of tricks, lots of strategies, and so you have to have the tricks and strategies to deal with whatever they come up with—which means that you need a wide range.

One of the important tools you're going to need as you practice is learning how to use different perceptions to get the mind more firmly planted in the breath, to the point where everything settles down, the breath really stops, and there's just a feeling of solid energy that's not moving in any way, but feels sufficient in and of itself.

That's when you can start playing with the perception around the form of the body. See what happens when you erase any perception of a boundary around the body. Replace the perception of "body" with a perception of space permeating throughout the atoms of the body. There are lots of things you can play with. From space, you can apply the perception of knowing, knowing, knowing. Mindfulness is what allows you to keep these perceptions in place, mindfulness combined with alertness and your determination not to let the perception budge. This is the only way we get to see the power of perception: by holding on to a perception for a long period of time.

This is why we try to develop mindfulness as an important part of the practice: this ability to keep something in mind. Once you've got a good perception, just hold on to it and see where it goes. This is how you learn to master the various tools you need as a meditator, and you get insight into the process of perception, the process of fabrication. Your concentration

practice begins to contain within it a lot of the lessons you're going to need for discernment.

So try to be very conscious of the process of perception. What perceptions are you holding in mind right now? And what are they doing, in terms of the breath, in terms of feelings? Do you like what they're doing, or are you not sure? If you're not sure, hold on to them for a while and see what happens. Then try a perception that turns the first one inside out, and hold on to that one for a while. The only way you're going to learn how to meditate is to experiment like this. Because after all, we're here to see something we've never seen before, to attain something we've never attained before. That means doing things you've never done before. And the doing, of course, is the doing that's going on in the mind.

Right here is one way of getting more and more sensitive to that doing: by working with these perceptions and seeing what they do, and developing sensitivity to know where you're doing something well or something not, something helpful or something not. If you bring the attitude that you're here to learn, then you can learn something new each time you meditate, each time you breathe.

Judging Your Meditation

February 3, 2008

Meditation is supposed to work. It's supposed to make a difference in your mind. It helps you to be more patient, more equanimous. It strengthens your powers of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, and allows you to tap into sources of happiness and well-being that you might not be able to tap into otherwise. Yet often, when you begin to meditate, you're told that there's no such thing as good meditation or bad meditation, that you're not supposed to judge it.

How do you know that it works? Well, the reason you're told not to judge it at the beginning is because beginning meditators are notoriously poor judges of what's going on in their minds. When we start out, we tend to be impatient. We don't know how to read our minds. So you're given a method and told to stick with it, to trust in the process.

But if the meditation is supposed to make you more patient, more discerning, then there should come a point where you can read your own mind, where you're not too impatient; you begin to get a sense of what's going on. After a while, you should be able to judge: Is this working for you, or not? That way, if it's not working, you can make changes.

This is why the Buddha didn't teach just one method of meditation. He taught different methods because different methods will work for different people. Also, different methods will work for the same person at different times. He taught breath meditation as home base. In other words, he didn't want you to be a dilettante, just flitting around from method to method as the mood struck you. He wanted you to put the mind in a place where it can look at itself. And the breath is a good place to do that, because the breath is very intimate with the mind. Of the different processes in your body, the one that's closest to the functioning of the mind is the breath. Greed arises in the mind, anger, or fear, and it's going to immediately have an effect on the breath. Then that effect spreads to other aspects of the body as well.

At the same time, the breath gives you something to play with. You can experiment with different kinds of breathing to see what impact they have

on the mind. You see, sometimes, that the breath is not only a way of making you sensitive to the mind, but it also gives you tools for dealing with the mind, putting it back in shape when you find that it's out of shape. When the mind is feeling down, sometimes just some good, deep, in-and-out breathing, thinking of the breath going to different parts of the body, can wake you up, freshen you up, put the mind in a much better mood. Or if the mind needs steadying, you can breathe down into your feet, into your hands, or the middle of the spine. That seems to transfix the mind into the body.

But there are times when the breath, on its own, is not enough. Which is why the Buddha taught other methods as well. When he taught his son, Rahula, how to meditate, he gave him ten different methods in addition to the breath: how to get the mind to settle down and be more patient, resilient; how to replace thoughts of ill will with goodwill, cruelty with compassion, resentment with empathetic joy, and irritation and aversion with equanimity; how to contemplate the body so as to overcome feelings of lust; and how to watch the inconstancy of everything in body and mind as a way of undercutting the conceit that you are this or you are that. So, the Buddha didn't have Rahula depend just on the breath.

At the same time, he taught him ways of learning how to judge what needs to be done. Part of this has to do with the teachings on kamma. When I first went to practice meditation with Ajaan Fuang, there were a lot of different Buddhist teachings that I was curious and uncertain about. And I'd ask him about them. One day he finally said: "Look, there's only one thing you have to believe in to meditate, and that's kamma." In other words, you are responsible for your actions, and the quality of your intentions is going to make a difference.

But you have to understand that the Buddha's understanding of kamma is not the deterministic kind of teaching that many people think it is. Understanding kamma in his way helps you to understand and read your own mind. What you're experiencing right now is the combination of three sorts of things: the results of past actions, past intentions, as they're sprouting right now in the present; your present actions and intentions; and the results of your intentions and actions right now. Which means that when something comes up in the meditation, it might be the result of what you're doing right now, and it might be the result of something you did in the past.

You have to learn how to read that. Sometimes, as people start meditating, they uncover all kinds of things coming up in their minds and they blame the meditation. But it may simply be that the time has come for that particular past action to sprout right now. The meditation allows you to see it for what it is, whereas otherwise, you might run away from it. So it's not the fault of the meditation, say, that anger suddenly appears in your mind, or greed or lust or fear. You have to alert yourself to that issue. You have to be sensitive to this: Does it come from what you're doing right now, or does it come from the past?

This is why you have to meditate again and again: to test a particular technique in different situations. If you begin to see that every time you meditate, it does tend to stir up unskillful thoughts, maybe that's not the meditation technique for you. Especially if it doesn't give you a way of counteracting or separating yourself from those unskillful thoughts.

There was a case of some monks in the time of the Buddha doing contemplation of the body. They got so disgusted with their bodies that they started committing suicide or hiring assassins to kill them. The Buddha found out about this, called the remaining monks together, and said: "When unskillful mental states arise in the mind, go back to the breath." He said that breath meditation helps clear those unskillful states out of the mind in the same way that the first rains of the rain season clear all the dust out of the air.

So it is possible that even a good meditation technique, if misapplied, can cause problems.

This means that you have to be sensitive to where a particular thought is coming from. Is it something just popping into the mind, or is it a result of what you're doing right now? One rule of thumb is that if a thought simply pops into the mind, that's probably the result of past kamma. What you do in response to that thought: That's present kamma. That's a good rule of thumb to start out with. You'll find that things are a little bit more complex as you get into them, but it's a good place to start.

Another important understanding about kamma is that there's skillful kamma and unskillful kamma. Skillful kamma leads to a sense of well-being that causes no harm either to you or to other people. It doesn't take anything away from them, and doesn't lead to increased greed, anger, or delusion in your own mind.

It's important to understand that skillful kamma, which is a skillful intention, is not the same thing as a good intention. Good intentions are well-meaning but they may be unskillful. They may be based on misunderstanding or larded with denial. In other words, what seems to be a good intention may simply be sheep's clothing over something else. The only way you're going to read that is by looking at the results of acting on your intentions.

This is why meditation is a kind of experimentation. You do something, and you watch for the results. Then you do it again and watch for the results again. Then you change things a little bit, to see if you get different results. Make comparisons.

Now, this does depend on the fact that you're beginning to get more patient and more sensitive to what's going on in the body and the mind—and that you're truthful with yourself. The Buddha once said that that was the primary prerequisite for learning the Dhamma: that you be truthful, both with other people and with yourself.

So when you have these qualities of patience and truthfulness, which hopefully you've developed through the meditation, you're in a much better position to read what's going on and to decide for yourself what's working and what's not. But, at the same time, keep those two principles of kamma in mind: Sometimes what you're experiencing is the result of past kamma, which you can't do much about, and sometimes it's the result of what you're doing right now, which you can do something about. That's what the meditation is all about. It's your kamma in the present experimenting with different ways of dealing with pleasure, different ways of dealing with pain, to see what approaches give the best results. Over time, as a meditator, your powers of judgment should get more and more precise in this way.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha included evaluation as part of right concentration. You start with something simple like the breath. You breathe in certain ways and notice the effect it has on the body, the effect it has on the mind. Then try breathing other ways to see what effect you get. You'll begin to notice that different ways of breathing are good in different situations. The body will have different breath needs even in the course of a single day. This is an ideal way of sensitizing yourself to what you're doing and the results of what you're doing right now. Which is why, of all the steps in breath meditation, the adjustment of the breath, working with the

different breath energies in the body, is the one that takes the most time but also gives you the most lessons.

It's something you can play with for your whole life, keep learning new things about breath energy, new things about how the breath relates to the mind, how the mind relates to the breath, as you experiment and play.

Ajaan Suwat used to say meditation isn't something you just play with. Ajaan Fuang said you've got to play with it. But they were talking about two different kinds of play. Ajaan Suwat was referring to a desultory playing around without any purpose, which doesn't get you anywhere. Ajaan Fuang was talking about playing with a purpose: experimenting, exploring, trying to figure out what's most skillful. That kind of playing develops your powers of judgment, develops your powers of discernment, starting with the breath and then moving into the mind.

As those powers of discernment get more developed, you're in a better and better position to see that there is such a thing as good meditation, and there is such a thing as a bad meditation session. And you've got the understanding, and the patience, and truthfulness, to become a better and better judge of when the meditation is working and when it's not, and what to do when it's not.

So, on the one hand, don't be too quick to judge your meditation, but on the other hand, try to develop the skills that will make you a reliable judge, so that your judgments are not judgmental, but are actually informative, helpful, and an aid on the path.

Good & Bad Meditation

February 6, 2008

Meditation is supposed to work. It's supposed to make a difference. That's why we do it. So why do we sometimes hear that there's no such thing as good or bad meditation? Part of the reason is that when you start out meditating, you're not a good judge of what's good and what's bad. This is a problem with meditators everywhere. If you're not familiar with the territory of the mind, you can't tell a step forward from a step back. And if you're tied up in the problems of conceit, it makes things even more difficult. If what looks like a step forward is happening, you can get puffed up, proud, and complacent. If what looks like a step back happens, you get depressed. Either that or you go into denial.

Which is why, at the very beginning, you're told not to pass judgment on your meditation. Just do it. This is especially true when you go to a place where everybody who walks in the door is taught meditation right away. They can't assume that you have the maturity or the experience needed to judge your meditation. But ideally you should be developing the qualities as you meditate that will eventually put you in a position where you can pass judgment in a skillful way.

It should be the purpose of the meditation teacher to put you in a position where you don't need a meditation teacher anymore. The other day, I was talking to a friend who made the comment that it takes people twenty, thirty years to be able to judge their own meditation. That struck me as scary, because if after twenty years you can't tell when you're making progress or not, there's got be something wrong with the meditation. Meditation should develop the mental skills and qualities that make you a good judge of your progress.

In the beginning, it's good to sit with whatever comes up, because one of the attitudes and skills you need to be a meditator is patience. You're able to sit with whatever happens. Whether it looks good or looks bad, you can sit with it. You can watch it. The purpose is not that you're just going to sit there and say, "Well, this is as good as it's going to ever get, so I might as

well accept it and be happy with this." That's a very defeatist attitude. The purpose of patience is to watch and learn. The more patient you are, the more things you'll be able to see, because you can sit with whatever comes up.

This is why the Buddha taught Rahula meditation on the elements: Make your mind like water; make your mind like wind; make it like fire; make it like earth. These things have no preferences. They're willing to wash away anything, good or bad; blow away anything, good or bad; burn anything or have anything thrown on them, good or bad, with no sense of revulsion or delight. They don't make choices as to what's nice and what's not.

Now, the purpose of making your mind like this is not to make it a clod of dirt. It's to enable you to see what's going on—steadily, consistently, over a long period of time. This is because the insight we're after here is not simply that things are inconstant, but that there's a pattern to their inconstancy. You want to be able to see that pattern all the way from cause to effect and from effect back to cause. That requires that your gaze be steady and consistent.

It's like having measuring equipment in a scientific experiment. To begin with, you want the equipment to be set on a solid table set on a solid floor in a solid building on a solid piece of land. That way, if there's a little squiggle in the recording stylus, it actually has something to do with the experiment. It is not a result of the table's wobbling or the building's wobbling or a tremor underground. In addition, you want the stylus to keep riding continually. You don't want there to be a gap, say, from 1 a.m. until 5 a.m. Your experiment is a long-term experiment, and you want it to be 24/7. That's the kind of solidity and consistency you want in your mind in order to be able to see what's going on—so that when things are good, bad, or indifferent, you can stay right here.

The other quality that makes you a good observer is honesty: Whatever comes up, you're going to admit that it's come up. You're not going to go into denial and you're not going to embellish it, make it more than what it really is.

This is the foundation for a really scientific attitude toward the meditation. Sometimes you hear of specific methods as being scientific, that they've worked everything out, all the steps, and all you have to do is follow

the steps. They even have all the questions and answers on cards; they have standard meditation talks. Everybody gets put through the same process. That's scientific in the same way that an assembly line is scientific, but it doesn't mean that the workers on the assembly line are going to be scientific, or they understand anything of what's going on. The process is too mechanical. That's not the science that the Buddha was teaching. He was teaching how to experiment, how to take joy in finding things out—which means that sometimes you do what you're told in the meditation and sometimes you do what you're not told, so you can see what happens.

Once you've got those qualities of honesty and patience under your belt, you can start playing around. Kurt Vonnegut once made the observation that scientists are basically little kids, and little kids like to play. Scientists like to play. They get grants and fellowships so that they can play big time. Of course, we hope that their playing will have some pay-off. There are whole branches of science whose pragmatic pay-off is not immediately evident. But it's good to have people experimenting, trying to figure things out, because you never know when a chance discovery is going to be valuable.

So it is with the meditation. When the Buddha taught, he taught techniques that open things up to questions. It wasn't that everything was all certain and mapped out and that all you have to do is follow the steps ABCD down the line. He would try to provoke questions in the mind: How do you breathe in a way that calms the effect of the breath on the body? Are you aware of the whole body when you breathe in and breathe out? After you've answered the Buddha's questions, you can start asking questions of your own. There's a pain in your legs: How do you breathe so as to minimize the pain, or to at least put you in a position where you're not feeling threatened by the pain? I've often found in my own practice that a particular blockage in the body suddenly makes the meditation really interesting. Once, in my first year, I had a problem with my foot. I spent hours breathing in different ways to see how it affected the pain in the foot, and I learned a lot more from that pain than I did from a pile of Dhamma books.

So this is the Buddha's approach to meditation. He would make sure you have the right personal qualities, that you could be trusted to conduct experiments and be more or less objective about the results, and then he would set you loose. Sometimes, as with many scientific experiments, you

may follow a line of inquiry but it leads nowhere. Well, you've learned something. You've learned that that particular line of inquiry goes nowhere. Then you follow other lines of inquiry, and then others, until you find something that really does open things up in the mind.

So this is where having a sense of good and bad meditation finally does become useful. In one sense, every meditation is good if you bring the right attitude to it, regarding it as an opportunity to learn. With that approach, bad is bad only in the sense that a particular line of reasoning doesn't go where you want it, or a particular approach doesn't really give you any real knowledge. But when you start getting sloppy, when you start assuming things that you shouldn't assume, feeling certain about things that are still uncertain—in other words, making the same kind of mistakes that a bad scientist might make: That's meditation that's really bad.

Sometimes you can see it. Sometimes there are cases where, fairly well into the meditation, you still need to talk things over with a teacher. But you want to get so that you can pass judgment on things in a judicious way—i.e., you're no longer judgmental, but you use your powers of judgment wisely, precisely, accurately, with real wisdom. You're responsible for your meditation. Once you accept that attitude of responsibility, you become a lot more careful, a lot more mature. You don't blindly hope that the method on its own will carry you through. Your method will carry you through if you're alert and watchful and judicious in the ways you apply the method. That's when the meditation gets good.

Evaluating Your Practice

January 12, 2012

When you try to bring the mind into concentration, there are two mental faculties that do most of the work. One is directed thought, and the other is evaluation. You bring your mind to the object, or as they say in Thai, you lift the mind to the object, you lift the object to the mind. This means that you make them both prominent, that you're right here in the present moment, you're going to stay with the breath in the present moment, and you want to emphasize the awareness and the breath. You try to keep them in line with one another. That's directed thought.

As for evaluation, you look at how things are going. How is the breath going? How is the mind going? Are they staying together? Or are they moving apart? If they're moving apart, what can you do to bring them back together, and allow them to stay together with a sense of ease and well-being? Because that's the direction where we're going: ease and well-being.

Now, to do this, both the evaluation and the directed thought have to use a few other mental qualities as well, such as mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness means keeping things in mind, remembering what you should keep in mind and what things you put aside for the time being. You have a couple of frames of reference you want to keep in mind. To begin with, you're focusing on the breath in and of itself. At the same time, you're also keeping track of the mind, to make sure it stays with the breath. If the mind slips off, you want to be able to remember, "What have I been able to do in the past that keeps the mind with the breath and keeps it there securely?" In other words, if you've learned lessons in your meditations, you want to be able to bring them to mind. You don't want to forget them.

Over time, this gets more and more instinctive, and less verbal. You have a sense that things are going well or not going well just by how they feel. But in the beginning, you have to be a little bit more articulate about it. If you've learned that long breathing is easy to stay with in the past, stay with long breathing now. See if that works this time. If it doesn't, you're going to learn something new. There are times when the long breathing works and times

when it doesn't work. When it doesn't work, what are you going to do? Try shorter breathing, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter.

This is where the evaluation comes in as you're checking to see what's working and what's not. The ability to evaluate things is really important. It's how you govern yourself as a meditator. You can't have a teacher there, right in your ear, all the time whispering, "Now you do this, now you do that." You want to be able to remember the good lessons you've learned both from others and from your own practice. If there are lessons you're not quite sure about, well, you file them away, and bring them out and put them to the test. You have to develop your own powers of observation, to see what's working and what's not—and how to know if something is working, and if something is not.

This takes time. And because it takes time, it also takes patience, which is a quality that we in the West seem to have thrown away. At the very least, we don't develop it much. Patience, of course, requires equanimity, the ability to step back from things and watch them, not to identify closely with things that are causing you to suffer. That requires the mindfulness to remember that you have the choice: If a feeling comes up in the mind and it seems really heavy, really painful, you do have the choice not to identify with it. You can identify just with the sense of the observer watching it. If you have no other techniques to use to counteract it, just be there, watching, watching, watching.

Try to give that sense of the watcher at least one comfortable spot in the body to stay with. Because all too often, when there's an uncomfortable feeling in the mind, there's going to be an uncomfortable feeling in the body to go along with it. If you identify with both, you're going to feel overwhelmed. So you have to remember that there are places you can step out. You can still be in the body in the present moment, but there are other, more pleasant parts of the body you can inhabit. You can still be with your awareness in the present moment, but you don't have to identify with all the thoughts going through.

There's a passage in one of Ajaan Maha Boowa's talks where he's talking about how, after Ajaan Mun passed away, he was feeling really lost. Ajaan Mun had been the person he'd gone to for advice for eight years now, and now he had nobody to go to advice for. What was he going to do? He began remembering some of Ajaan Mun's teachings, and one stood out: "If

anything comes up in the mind that you're not sure about—it might be risky to believe it or to follow through with it—just step back and stay with that sense of the knower, the observer. Don't get involved and eventually it will pass." That's good advice for any meditator anytime. Something comes up in the mind, you're not sure whether it's good or bad, well, just watch it. If you have techniques to know that this is not going to be a healthy thing to follow through with, and you have techniques for counteracting it, then go ahead and counteract it. But if you're not sure, just watch.

After all, that's how the Buddha learned. He didn't have teachers to show him the way. He tried things out, he learned how to recognize when he had made a mistake, and then he tried something different. And how did he know whether it was right or wrong? He developed the ability to watch, and as he was watching, he could ask a few questions: "Where does this lead? What does it do to the mind?" Over time, he gained a balanced sense of what's skillful and what's not.

The word "balance" here is really important. It's like the difference between logic and reason. You can follow a principle logically, and carry it out to it's a logical conclusion, and sometimes it's crazy, totally out of balance. That's because you've taken just one thing and run with it, without stopping to think, "What other principles might apply here?" Reason is when you balance all the various principles that are relevant.

Again, a story from Ajaan Maha Boowa: He talks about how he was really determined that during the rains retreat never to accept any food that didn't come directly from his own alms round. And he was getting very proud about it. Ajaan Mun noticed the pride, so every once in a while he would slip a little food into Ajaan Maha Boowa's bowl. Because he was the teacher, he could do it. He was just pointing out, "You hold on to one principle, and sometimes another defilement springs up in its wake." So you have to be on the alert for that. Sometimes when you're really hard on yourself you get proud.

There's also the problem of being really easy with yourself and getting proud about that, too. I was reading recently about someone saying he's learned how not to hold on either to the arahant ideal or to the bodhisattva ideal, because holding on, of course, creates difficulties and conflict. You get the sense that he feels that he's higher than either of those ideals. Of course,

the problem is he hasn't even gotten anywhere near either of them. What's needed is a sense of when to hold on and when to let go.

It's like being a carpenter. Sometimes you hold on to your hammer and sometimes you put the hammer down because you have to pick something else up, a chisel, say, or a plane. Then you know when to put that down and pick up something else in its place. You know when to make marks on the wood that you're working with, and you know when the time comes to sand them off. In Pali this is called kalaññuta, having a sense of time, mattaññuta, having a sense of enough, attaññuta, having a sense of yourself, when you're ready for something and when you're not.

Although there are Pali words for these things, there's no clear-cut formula for any of them. They're things you have to learn over time by being observant, by noticing when a particular technique is helping you and when it's not, and what you can do in its place. You learn ideas about these things from other people, but you master them as skills by applying them yourself. If nothing is working, you say, "Okay, let's experiment a little bit here." Which requires that you not to be too eager to jump to conclusions. Again with Ajaan Mun: Often he'd be off in the forest and he'd get visions of devas coming and telling him he should practice this way or not practice that way. That'd be pretty impressive: visions of devas coming and trying to help you. But he'd always test these things. He wouldn't immediately jump to the conclusions that that's the way it had to be. Everything has to be tested.

And you have to train yourself to be a reliable experimenter, or a reliable reader of what's going on. Again: patience, mindfulness, alertness, and the ability to step back. It's in this way that you learn to monitor your own practice, evaluate your own practice. This means, of course, that the principle of evaluation is not just something for the practice of concentration. It should cover all of the aspects of your practice, as you evaluate what you're doing, what you're saying, what you're thinking about, and then making adjustments as necessary. This is how you grow. This is how you mature as a meditator, as a person practicing the Dhamma.

Ultimately, you reach the point where, as the texts say, you become independent in the Buddha's teaching. In other words, you develop an all-around sense of these things, to the point where you can rely on yourself to make the adjustments, to make the corrections you need. Up to that point, you need the example of others to help keep you on course. Because the

mind does have its tendencies—through the things it likes, or the things it's averse to, or its fears, or its delusions—to go off course very easily.

This is why the Buddha set up the Sangha, so that there's an apprenticeship. You not only listen to Dhamma talks, you also live with someone who's been practicing the Dhamma so that you can pick up that person's example. When you internalize the lessons, there comes a point where you're independent. But until then, remember: You still have things to learn. There's always that question of how to bring things into balance: What's the right time, what's the right place? If there's no teacher around, try at least to keep those questions in mind. What are you up for right now? What's the appropriate task right now? What should you hold on to right now? What should you let go? Try to be alive to these questions all the time, and that can help protect you from a lot of wrong turns, making it more likely that you'll stay on course.

Measuring Progress

November 28, 2010

This is a path that we're following. The Buddha's first teaching was about the noble eightfold path, and his last teaching was about the noble eightfold path, and the fact that he called it a path underscores the point that it's meant to go someplace. Yet if you try to measure your progress on the path, it's difficult. If we were to ask for a show of hands—"Who in here has a practice that every day, in every way, is getting better and better?"—there wouldn't be any hands. There's progress on some fronts, and what seems to be regress on other fronts. Yet we still keep at it, partly just on the general principle: You know that if you're developing meditation, if you're developing concentration, you're better off than if you weren't. Because many things that we would need to make an objective measurement are not there. If you could wind up two doll versions of yourself and say, okay, this doll version is not going to practice, and this version is going to practice, and see where they would end up, you could actually make a comparison. But you can't see what you'd be like if you weren't practicing.

At the same time, as you develop your powers of mindfulness and alertness, you get more sensitive to what's going on in the mind, so that in your measurement of what's skillful or what's quiet in the mind, what counts as good concentration, what counts as a good insight, your standards are going to change. Like that old issue in relativity: When you go faster, the ruler that you would use to measure things would change in its length. Time would change. So it's difficult to make comparisons.

But in general, you should be able to notice that you're getting more and more sensitive to what's going on in the mind. Today's concentration may not be better than yesterday's, but as long as you're aware of what's happening, you're doing it right. Because it's only when you're aware that you can deal with what's going on in the mind.

So much of this has to do with how much you admit to what is going on in the mind, how sensitive you are to those little voices in the mind that used to be below the radar, or used to be inaudible, and now are audible. That's

progress. Because only when you can hear those voices, and only when you can see what's going on, see the movements of the mind, can you do something about them.

But there's also that principle that today's practice has got to be better than yesterday's because yesterday is not around anymore. It's like that man who sold Chinese dumplings near Wat Dhammasathit. He would drive down the road in front of the monastery every day. He had a loudspeaker on his truck calling out that he was selling Chinese dumplings, Chinese dumplings, and he sounded a little drunk. "Today's Chinese dumplings," he would always say, "are better than yesterday's." Then tomorrow he'd come and say, "Today's Chinese dumplings are better than yesterday's." And he would keep it up every day. Every day they would get better and better, according to his slogan, and you'd wonder at what point they'd reach the Platonic ideal of a Chinese dumpling. But then someone pointed out to me: Well, think about where yesterday's dumplings are right now. Either they're still in your intestines or they're down in the cesspools, so whatever the guy's going to sell is obviously better than yesterday's.

So always think about the breath your breathing right now, and the concentration you're practicing right now, is better than they were yesterday, because yesterday's is gone. You're dealing with what you've got right now. That's where you want to focus your attention. This is especially important when things went really well yesterday and they don't seem to be going quite so well today. You can get fixated on that if you're not paying full attention to right now, and that makes today's meditation even worse. So you drop that thought and stay where you are. Focus on this breath, this breath, knowing that by exercising your mindfulness, exercising your concentration, it's got to get better.

The one thing you do have to worry about is the tendency to think that if the meditation is going better, then it should automatically make your life better. But that's not the case. Because it's very easy to develop increased mindfulness, increased discernment while you're meditating, and just throw it away for the rest of the day.

Ajaan Fuang once had a student whose powers of concentration were really strong. She complained to him, though, that she didn't see that it was having any influence on the rest of her life. She still got angry, she still got frustrated with people; she had a real problem with the anger. It was

because she wasn't developing any discernment, and she wasn't using the discernment she did have, consciously applying it for the rest of the day. Part of the problem was that when she was in concentration it was very intense, and she couldn't even think. She didn't have the ability that Ajaan Fuang was trying to teach her, which was to pull out just a little bit, not enough to destroy the concentration, but just enough to observe what was going on. She was either in it or out of it, and that was it. So of course when she was out of it, it was as if she had been resting, but that was all.

An important part of the practice is learning how to watch what's going on right now right now, right now, right now, and learning how to develop that talent in the rest of the day as well. When you're speaking to people, what's going on right now? Right now. Right now. What are you saying? What's your motivation? The more you actually apply these principles, the better chance they have of developing.

When you're with the breath, be prepared for the fact that the mind will wander off, or something else will come up, and it's possible that you would suddenly decide—or something in your mind will hijack the process and decide—that you want to think about that other thing. Your ability to catch that happening and to come right back to the breath: That's how you make the meditation progress. The more quickly you can see how a distraction forms, the more quickly you can drop it. That's how you develop your mindfulness, that's how you develop your alertness. It's not a matter of simply sitting here very still and trusting in the process. There is a kind of momentum that develops. But the possibility of its really developing and also being an influence on the rest of your life depends on your alertness right now, your sensitivity right now, your ability to catch little things going on that might pull you away, and your ability to cut through any ties or any attachments that may develop. That's what makes the meditation progress.

And you find that you can sense progress almost in spite of yourself. It's the unexpected things: Something comes up in the course of the day that would normally set you off, and you realize it didn't set you off. Or you can see it setting you off, and you realize that you're pulled back from it a little bit. This ability to pull back and watch is one of the most important things you're trying to develop as you meditate, so that when an emotion arises, or a thought arises, you don't automatically go with it.

It's like something running out of your chest, or running out of your mind, and you can see it because you're staying right here instead of running with it; you're watching it run away. When you don't run with it, it doesn't go very far. So when you notice that happening, you realize, "Okay, something new is happening in the mind. A new ability has developed." What may happen is, of course, now that you've got this improved ability, you see defilements you didn't see before.

That can be discouraging, but don't let it discourage you. Remember Ajaan Fuang's image: You have a room that you never dust, so you never notice how much dust fell on the floor today, because you haven't been dusting at all. But if you dust every day, you'll notice even the slightest little bit of dust that appears. That doesn't mean you have more dust. It just means you're more sensitive.

So, on the one hand, you do have some trust in the process: that by working on mindfulness and alertness, you're better off than if you didn't. But at the same time, you also have to push a little bit by trying to be as observant as possible, try to heighten your sensitivity, knowing that the more sensitive you are to the movements of the breath, the movements of the mind right in the present moment, the better chance you have of doing something about them. That's what really counts.

Delusion Concentration

November 19, 2010

When you meditate, there are two problems on two sides that you have to watch out for: pain and distraction on one side, and pleasure and stillness on the other. Now, you're going to meet with these things inevitably. What you have to watch out for, though, is how you approach them, how you deal with them.

If the pain and distraction get you irritated, you've lost the battle. You have to be very patient and very insistent. Each time the mind wanders away from the breath, you bring it right back. As for pains in different parts of the body, there may not be pains as you start out, but you know they're going to develop in the course of the hour, so you get ready for them. As soon as the breath gets comfortable, think of it spreading down the back, spreading down the legs, wherever the pains may tend to congregate. You open up the breath channels leading to those spots and leading away from them. Keep your main attention with the comfortable parts of the breath, the areas where the breath feels good.

This, of course, leads to the problem on the other side. When you're with the comfortable parts, you have to be very careful not to just wallow around in the pleasure. This is especially tempting after a tiring day. It's like coming home to a big feather bed. You just want to jump right in and get swallowed up into the feather bed.

You notice this especially in the forest monasteries in Thailand where they have long evening sits that go on for a couple of hours. The primary thought in people's minds is: "How can I get through these hours as pleasantly as possible?" The mind finds a little place—it's called delusion concentration—where there's a sense of ease, and the mind's not doing any work at all. It's just very, very still. You go to hide out there, but you don't really know where you are. You come out, and there's that little question: "Was I awake, or was I asleep, or what was that?" What happened was there was a sense of pleasure, and you dropped the breath and just went for the pleasure. You didn't want to do any work at all.

So the middle course here is to stick with the breath. Remember that the pleasure is created by the flow of the breath, the stillness of the mind, working together. Both of these conditions depend on the focus of your mind on the breath, alert and mindful. You don't want to drop your alertness; you don't want to drop your mindfulness, because that's what happens in delusion concentration. You're not very alert and you really forget what you're doing and so you slip into the pleasure.

You always want to have that thought in the back of your mind: "I'm staying with the breath." You're alert to both what the breath is doing and to what the mind is doing. As for the pleasure, it'll take care of the body on its own. Whatever rest or healing comes from this sense of ease and pleasure is not going to be increased by wallowing in it. Just let it spread, let it move through the body. It'll take care of things on its own. Your job is to stay as mindful and alert as possible, focused on the breath. It sounds like work, and it is a kind of work, but it's work in pleasure, work in stillness, an effort that you put into pleasure, an effort that you put into the stillness. It's good work.

So you keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath, and then you evaluate how things are going. You drop the evaluation only when everything is really, really refined, and you can stay centered and still without losing your focus or your alertness. That's when you can simply become one with the breath. The breath, the pleasure, and your awareness all seem to become one entity. As long as you can maintain your alertness and mindfulness while you do that, you're fine.

The problem is that people like to go right there without taking the mindfulness and alertness along. They just drift off. The image I think of is of a mosquito that's hit a little blood vessel in your skin. If you've ever watched a mosquito and allowed it to bite you and see what happens, you'll notice that it sticks its little nose in there, and it finds a little bit of blood, and it just sucks and sucks and sucks, and finally it gets so big that it looks like it's going to burst. It doesn't burst, but it's so blissed out that its feet seem to lose touch with your skin. It's just hanging there by the nose. Sometimes you try to brush it away, and at that point it won't go—it's so blissed out from all that blood.

That's what happens in delusion concentration: You hit that nice little source of ease, you just stick yourself in it, and then you let go of everything else, including the mindfulness, including the alertness. It feels good, but

you don't really gain anything from it. It is restful to some extent, but not nearly as energizing as if you were focused on the breath, staying mindful and alert.

Because we're not here just to bliss out. We're here to learn how to use the bliss. This is part of our path. And whenever pains come up, we want to learn how to use those, too. This is what's so radically different about the Buddha's teaching. Some people during his time were into self-torture. They had pain as their goal, they wanted to have as much pain as possible, the more pain the better, to burn away their defilements or cleanse away their defilements. That's what they thought. But then, of course, by far the vast majority of the people were headed in the other direction and just wanted to wallow in as much pleasure as possible—like those little rats with implants in their brains. The scientists find the pleasure center in the rats' brains, they stick a wire in there and connect it to a little strip of metal on the outside of the skull. The rat can put the little metal strip up against a little bar and get a slight electric shock, which stimulates its pleasure center. And that's all the rats will do. They put the strip against the bar to get a steady stimulus to their pleasure center and just stay there. They'll stop eating; they'll stop doing everything else. They end up dying because they're so addicted to the pleasure.

That's the way most people are. If we could have our pleasure center stimulated, that would be it. That's all most people would want. And like the rats, we would die because of our pleasure—or at the very least, our goodness would die. The possibility of finding a well-being, a sense of true happiness that's deeper than that would die away.

What the Buddha wants us to do is to learn how to use whatever pains there are in the body as a way of developing mindfulness and alertness, and to use the pleasure that comes from a still mind as our food along the path, as our means for prying ourselves away from sensual pleasures, sensual desires—putting the mind in a position where it can look deeper inside to see where it's still holding on, where it's creating even the slightest bit of stress or dis-ease for itself.

So don't look at the pain as an enemy, and don't look at the pleasure as your true friend. You have to remember that you're going to use these things. They're tools, they're a means to an end. You need to be careful how

you use those tools. Even though it's work, this is good work, as you think about the breath and evaluate it,

Ajaan Lee compares it to sifting flour. As you sift the flour, it gets finer and finer and finer, higher and higher in quality. In the same way, as you evaluate the breath with more and more sensitivity, the sense of ease and energy in the body gets more and more refined, more and more refined, more still. But at the same time, if you're on top of everything, the mind doesn't drift off. It stays alert. Even when the in-and-out breath stops and the sense of the shape of the body begins to disappear, you're right here. You're alert, and you know you're alert. The body seems like a mist, and you can focus in on the space between those little droplets of mist. As long as you know what you're doing, you're fine.

But all this is a means to an end. And you can never let go of what keeps the concentration right, which is your mindfulness, your alertness, and the discernment that you bring as you evaluate things. Those are the things you have to hold on to all the way down through the path, that keep you from wandering off to either side.

So be very careful about what you let go of and what you hold on to, because it makes the difference between staying on the path or wandering off into the weeds and the jungle, wasting a lot of time.

No Mistakes Are Fatal

January, 2003

Our minds are pretty chaotic systems, which is why following the middle way is difficult. It's so easy for a chaotic system to get knocked out of equilibrium, to veer off to the left, to veer off to the right. Staying in the middle is difficult; it requires a lot of balance.

It's no wonder that when psychologists describe the workings of the mind, they tend to use fluid mechanics as their main analogy. In other words, the mind acts like water: the way water swirls around and forms eddies, the way it gets pushed down here, goes underground, and comes out over there. Sometimes it builds up into huge waves. I was reading the other day about enormous waves, called rogue waves, that suddenly form out in the ocean. Things come together just right—this little wave adds on to that little wave—and all of a sudden they build into enormous rogue waves that sweep across the ocean and then, after a while, mysteriously dissipate. It's the same with the mind. Sometimes rogue waves come crashing through the mind and you wonder where they came from.

It's easy for tiny little things to set them off. This is why we have to be careful in our practice. Don't regard the little details or little distractions as totally unimportant. Ajaan Mun used to say that it's very rare that a whole tree gets into your eye, but sometimes just a little sawdust can get into your eye and blind you. Sometimes the little things are the ones that set you off, so you have to be careful.

On the other hand, though, you have to be confident that even if the mind does get knocked off balance you can bring it back. Otherwise the practice would be full of fear all the time—afraid of tipping off too far to the left, too far to the right, toppling upside down. There's only one way of learning what the balance point is, and that's through experimenting. And you can experiment only when you're not afraid. So you have to develop the confidence that even when you do go far off the path to one side or the other, you can pull yourself back. There's always that new opportunity in the mind to give yourself a fresh start.

In this way you can experiment and gain a sense of where the balance is because you know that no mistakes are fatal. You come back and you put yourself on the path again. You fall off... well, you put yourself back on the path again. Ajaan Mun once said at another point, "It's normal for people to go off on the side." You get stuck on the right side of the path looking at the flowers, sniffing the breeze, or on the left side on the path where you're stuck in the mud. But you can extract yourself from both sides.

This is why we have techniques in meditation. This is what they're for. They assume that you're going to go off on either side, and so they give you paths for bringing yourself back. When the level of energy in your mind is too strong—your mind starts bouncing around like a ping-pong ball—there are calming practices. When your energy level goes weak—you start getting bored, nothing seems to interest you, nothing seems to be worth doing—there are practices for energizing you. Think about your motivation—why you're practicing—and that can help get you going again.

Then there's the factor the Buddha calls "analysis of qualities," which means really looking carefully at what's going on. Often we get bored with the meditation because we've grown sloppy, we're not really paying careful attention, and nothing new seems to be coming along. Look very carefully at what you're doing. Look very carefully at each breath, and you'll begin to see things you didn't notice before.

This is why mindfulness and alertness are qualities appropriate at all times. Remind yourself why of you're on the path and be very careful to look at what you're doing, be very precise in watching, watching, watching what's going on. You begin to see that there's a lot going on here in the present moment. After all, you're creating a world here in the present moment, and that's not a simple activity. There's lots to observe, lots to notice, starting with the simple building blocks: the breath, and the mental qualities that are called "directed thought" and "evaluation," the ones that do all that chattering in your mind. You direct your thoughts to a particular topic and then you think about it, you evaluate it. You say, "This is this, and that's that, and this is good, and that's bad."

So you take those very basic building blocks and you put them together in a new way. Instead of chattering about things outside, you direct your thoughts to the breath, you evaluate the breath. Then there are the final set of building blocks, feelings and perceptions: feelings of pleasure, pain, or

neither pleasure nor pain, and the labels you put on all these things. You apply all those to the breath as well.

So you've got all the building blocks for your experience right here, and instead of building them into elaborate worlds, you very consciously don't. You build them into something very simple: a focused state of mind. Now, "simple" doesn't mean "easy." As I said, there are all these other currents going on in the mind. But as you keep coming back, coming back, you're coming back to these building blocks on a simple level. Keep it basic, but be very observant.

One of the reasons things don't stay basic in the mind is that we're so good at whipping things up out of these building blocks. It's like a meringue, or whipped cream: You take a little tiny bit of cream and you whip it up into this big blob of whipped cream. There's a lot of air in there, a lot of fabrication going on. So, what you want to do is keep things basic but be very observant, because you've got a lot of tricks up your sleeve for creating something out of nothing, making mountains out of the tiniest molehills. So, keep it on the level of molehills, very simple, very basic, and keep your eye out for those other tricks.

That's where things get fascinating, realizing how you deceive yourself all the time. Sometimes it comes down to a basic level of dishonesty in the mind. One part of the mind is very good at lying to another part of the mind. So you can start asking yourself, "Who's actually fooling whom here?" "Where's the curtain, the window shade, the wall that allows one part of the mind to fool another part of the mind?" Or, "Does it depend on the other part of the mind's willingness to be fooled?" There are lots of interesting political maneuvers going on in the mind, so watch out for those.

Fortunately, the best way of dealing with them is to keep things basic. Just refuse to play along. When things do come up in the mind as you're trying to get it to settle down, try to cut them off as quickly as possible. When a thought comes into the mind—you remember this person, you actually see this or that person's face—just say, "Goodwill for that person," and that's enough. You don't have to get involved in the stories associated with those faces. In the beginning, you don't have to trace those faces back: "How did that image come?" Just let it go.

This principle of keeping things simple is what enables balance to come more and more easily to the mind, for you to see the little movements that

otherwise might set things off. It's what they call the butterfly effect. A butterfly flaps its wings in Hong Kong, and a jetliner, as a result of the change in the currents of air, later crashes in Texas. Try to keep things simple so that you're aware of those little butterfly flutterings in the mind. But fortunately when the mind crashes it's not like a Texas airplane; it doesn't die unless you let it die. You can always pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and move on.

This is a good thing to remember in the practice. There's the story of King Ajatasattu. He killed his father and later felt a lot of regret, but there's a tradition that he's going to become a Private Buddha someday, even though he's got some really bad kamma to pay off first. Even Mara, who's the figure of temptation in the early Buddhist texts: There's a tradition that he, too, will someday become a Private Buddha.

No matter how much your mind may seem ready to crash, or if it has already crashed, you can always take heart, pick yourself up, because there's always new kamma, always new things you can do, with every moment. No mistakes are fatal.

When you have that confidence, you can experiment in the mind. Find out how much effort is too much, how much effort is too little, how too much activity in the mind gets you all stirred up, how too low a level of energy starts you falling asleep. These are all questions of balance and they can be answered only by experimenting, testing for yourself, finding out for yourself—What's too much? What's too little? What's too far to the right? What's too far to the left?—with the confidence that no matter what your mistakes, you can always correct them, you can always learn from them. That's the important thing.

Don't view a mistake as a really bad thing that you have to make up for afterwards. Use it as a learning experience. When you approach everything as a learning experience, then no meditation is wasted. Every meditation becomes an opportunity to learn. It's just a question of whether you take that opportunity or not.

The Buddha talks about the bases of success in meditation: concentration based on desire and right effort; concentration based on persistence, or energy and right effort; concentration based on intentness and right effort; and concentration based on the mind's powers of analysis and right effort. He talks about how important it is to reach a balance in all

these factors, because your desire can be too strong, too weak. Your persistence can be way overboard or way too lax. The same with intentness and your powers of analysis: Sometimes they go way overboard and sometimes they dribble away into nothing. There's only one way to learn balance in all these things, and that's through trial and error.

Yeah, I know. We here in America are all busy people. We want things to be packaged easily so we can get the most out of them and move on to our next... whatever. But the practice isn't like that. There isn't a "next whatever" to move on to. This is the most important issue facing the mind right now: the fact that it's creating suffering for itself. Its every action is aimed at happiness, but it's creating suffering for itself. That's the big problem in life. Only the practice can solve it. And the practice is an activity that gives results only when you're willing to be patient and experiment and learn from your mistakes. So that's what you've got to do.

But take heart. Even the Buddha made mistakes. Big mistakes. Six years of self-torture. All the noble disciples have made mistakes. It's just that they were willing to learn from them, and they didn't let the mistakes get them down.

Ups & Downs

October 3, 2009

I saw a chart recently of a famous golfer and the winnings he had earned over the past ten years or so. It wasn't a nice, smooth line. It didn't gradually rise and rise and rise. It had its ups and downs. It was largely an affair of his body: His body had its ups and downs.

When you think about the fact that the mind is a lot more complex than the body, then it should come as no surprise that when we meditate there will be lots of ups and downs, too. There's not going to be a smooth progress from Monday to Tuesday to Wednesday to Thursday, just up, and up, and up, all the time.

So you've got to learn how to deal with the downs. Which means that you also have to learn how to deal with the ups. Because the problem is that when things go up, we tend to get complacent. When you get complacent, you get careless, and that's going to turn you down. Then you get discouraged, and that can get you even further down—neither of which attitude is really skillful or helpful in the practice. You have to realize from the very beginning that there are going to be downs. There are days when the mind gets so still and so clear, and the meditation seems so effortless that you think: "Ah, this must be it. I've finally figured it out, and from here on out it's going to be smooth sailing." Then you suddenly discover that the boat capsizes, and you seem to be worse off than you were before.

You see this especially in two areas of the practice: getting the mind into stillness, into concentration, and in using your discernment to let go of your defilements. In both cases, you've got to learn how to develop a certain stamina, learn how to keep the mind on an even keel, and not be either excited by things going up or upset by things going down. Remind yourself: This is normal. This is the way things are always going to be until you reach stream entry. That's when you finally get something that's really solid and really secure.

So when things go down, you have to learn to give yourself a pep talk to remind yourself: "I can do this." Then any thought that comes into the mind

that says, "I've had enough of this, I can't take it anymore," you have to ask yourself, "Okay, are you ready to take another eon or two of suffering?" If you don't work on the mind now, there's no guarantee that you'll have chances on into the future. You've got the opportunity right here, right now, to work on the mind. Even though there may be some setbacks, that's par for the course.

And it's amazing how much you can find unexpected sources of strength inside. I had a friend in high school who went into ROTC. He told me after his first bout of military training that there had been one day when they were told to run x number of miles. Then, just as they got to the finish line, when they'd run what they were told to run, the instructor said, "Okay another quarter-mile." Some of the guys just dropped down right there. But some of the other ones realized that they could actually do it.

The instructor was teaching them an important lesson: If you're out on the battlefield, there's no telling when the battle is going to end or how long you're going to have to be in there. It's not the case that at 5 o'clock the bell rings and then you knock off for the night and get the rest you need. Sometimes the battle just goes on, and on, and on, where you think something is finally settled, and then some new problem shows up, and you've got to work on it. If you don't, you lose.

So you've got to learn how to find your sources of strength inside, and it's a good practice to realize that they are there. One way of making sure that they're there is not to get discouraged, not to block out of your mind the possibility that they could be there. After all, if it seems impossible to you that you can go any further, it's going to really be impossible, but not for any other reason. It's simply that you've made up your mind that you're able to give only so much. Then when you've given that much, you think, "Well, that's it. There's nothing left." As Ajaan Fuang used to say, "You're still breathing. Okay, there's still something you can do." You learn how to give yourself encouragement on the path.

As the Buddha told Rahula, when you find that you've done something skillful, congratulate yourself. Take joy in the fact that you're actually seeing some results in the training. They may not be permanent results, but at least you can see that you're heading in the right direction. There's no problem with reminding yourself that this is good, that you're beginning to get a handle on this.

It's like when, say, you have an addiction, and there's one night where you really have to struggle with the addiction and yet you win out. The next morning, when you wake up, you should remind yourself of how glad you are that you won out, and that the addiction didn't win out the night before. Fix that point in your memory, so that the next time you're tempted to give into the addiction, you can remind yourself, "Remember how good I felt the next morning?" That gives you some added sources of strength to use against the voice in the mind that says, "Well, you're going to give in anyhow, so you might as well give in now." Or: "If what you really want is some pleasure, well, here's some pleasure for you right now." You can counter with the fact that you were really happy that you didn't give in that last time. It gives you some more allies.

So when your concentration doesn't quite go as well as it has done in the past, give yourself some encouragement. Tell yourself: "I was able to make progress in the past, and of course there are going to be setbacks, but that doesn't mean I'm doomed to failure." Just pick up where you left off. Go back to the beginning and try to be very careful, very perceptive, very precise, in how you focus on the breath.

Don't try to take on too much. Ajaan Lee gives the example of someone who's planting a new orchard. It's not a good idea, he says, to clear all the land you've got and plant all the land you've got with all the trees you can afford. Because it might come about that there may be a drought soon after you plant the trees. They're all going to die, and then you won't have anything left. He says instead to take on what you can manage. If you can manage only a quarter acre at the start, okay, just start out with the quarter acre, and clear just that part of your land. Plant it with some trees, and as the trees grow, they start giving more fruit, and the fruit of course yields seeds, and then you can plant the seeds. The trees plant your orchard for you. Bit, by bit, by bit, things will grow, so that you're not totally wiped out by any setbacks.

So ask yourself, "Can I stay with this breath?" Okay, you've got that breath. "How about the next breath?" Okay, you've got that breath. "How about the next one?"

As for the progress you've made in the past, you don't have to focus on that. After all, you're not here to focus on past or future, you're here to focus on the present. Of course, in the back of your mind there's going to be the

desire to get back to where you were or past where you were, but you can't make that the focus of your attention right now. Focus on just the next step, just the next step. Break everything down into manageable bits.

Here again, learn how to give yourself pep talks. As I mentioned earlier, look into the books of Dhamma talks from the great ajaans. It's not that they explain very much in their Dhamma talks. Their talks are mostly encouragement: that the paths and their fruitions are still within reach, and you've got the basic resources you need. You've got a body, you've got a mind, and that's all you really need for the practice. That, plus the determination that you really do want to put an end to suffering.

You can fuel that determination by reminding yourself of all the sufferings you've been through, those that you can remember. Think also of the sufferings the Buddha tells you about that you can't remember: all the times you've had your head cut off, all the times you've lost a loved one. Then you look to the future: Do you want more of that? As for the sufferings in the various realms of rebirth, you don't have to worry about hell, just look at the animal realm: all the sufferings that we see that the animals have to go through, all the fears they have, with no one to explain anything to them. Do you want to slide back there? That's one form of encouragement.

Another form of encouragement, of course, is to read stories of people who actually made it to awakening. The Theragatha and Therigatha are really good in this area: the stories of the nuns and the monks who went through an awful lot, and had an awful lot of obstacles in their path, but were able to finally break through. Many times the obstacles they were facing were a lot greater than the ones we are. As Ven. Ananda said, there is a point where conceit can actually come in helpful: "They can do it, why can't I?" That may be a form of conceit, but it's a useful aid on the path.

In other words, you make use of anything that gives you energy, anything that gives you strength, in generating the desire and upholding your intent to let go of what's unskillful and to develop what's skillful.

The same holds true for different thought patterns, different attitudes, different defilements, that we know are not skillful, and yet the mind keeps going back to them. Sometimes you think that you've dealt with one of these defilements, and then you find a few days later that it's come back again. Or it may go away for a couple of months, and then it's suddenly back in full force. You ask yourself, "I thought I dealt with that before. Why is it coming

back?" If the thought comes up, "Maybe this is something I can never give up," don't ever give in to that thought. It's possible to give up any kind of unskillful activity. As the Buddha said, if it weren't possible to do that, he wouldn't have taught. Here it is: He's taught.

What this actually means is that when you dealt with it before, you were able to deal with it on a partial level, but there may be more to it. It's like pulling out a vine. You think you've got the roots pulled out, and you come back and the vine has grown up again. Well, it doesn't mean that you can never conquer the vine. It just means you didn't get all the roots. So you dig around a little bit more.

Years back, we had a very persistent vine down in the southeast corner of the monastery. We arranged for somebody to go down and dig it out, and we thought it had been taken care of. Then a few months later we went back, and it was spreading all over the place again. We had somebody else to go down and dig it out. It came back again. Finally, we had a group of people coming down from Vancouver, so I said, "Okay, see if you can get the whole root system this time." It was huge, about the size of a child, but they were able to get everything out, and the vine never came back.

So if you see something coming back, remind yourself: "Okay, I didn't get everything the last time. Let's go back and look at it again." This is where the image of the mind as a committee comes in useful: You were able to take care of some of the committee members, but others are still active. They may have been quiet the last time you went through, but now they're showing that they're still there. It's time to go back and look at the situation more carefully.

It's also important to remember that discernment is not just a matter of knowing what's skillful and what's not skillful. It's also a matter of learning how to talk yourself into doing what's skillful, and talking yourself out of doing what's unskillful. In other words, it's strategic.

Sometimes we get a sense that the Buddha's wisdom is a bunch of lists and vocabulary lessons. We've got this list of faculties, that list of hindrances, and somehow you think if you learn all the lists, that's it. But that's not why the Buddha taught the lists. He wants you to use those lists to analyze what's going on, and to figure out what to do about what's going on. It's all strategic. He wasn't the kind of philosopher who likes to contemplate abstract forms in and of themselves. He was much more

pragmatic. He was a craftsperson. The knowledge of a craftsperson is that you take what works so that you can get the effect that you want.

There's that passage where the Buddha talks about four types of activities in the world: things that you like to do that give good results, things that you don't like to do that give bad results—and those are not hard at all. The difficult ones, the ones that really test your discernment, he says, are the skillful things that you don't like to do, and the unskillful things that you like to do. In other words, things that give good results, but for some reason you don't like to do them; and things that give bad results, but you like to do them. That's where you really learn how to measure your discernment by how skillful you are in getting yourself to want to do the right thing.

So discernment is a matter not just of knowing the words, but also of knowing strategies: how to talk your mind into doing things that you know are skillful, but it doesn't really feel like doing them. You can ask, "Who in here doesn't like doing them?" In other words, this is a good place to not see the mind as a unified entity, just lots of little conflicting desires in there, and you've got to sort them out.

One way of sorting them out is to remind all of the desires, "Okay, we are all here for the sake of happiness, and we want a happiness that really lasts, right?" Some will say, "I don't care." You've got to ask them, "What do you mean, you don't care?" You've got to question that voice. Ask yourself, "Okay, the sufferings you had in the past, were you glad to have them? When there was suffering, when it was really hard, did you not care about them at all? No, you really cared at that point. You say don't you care for yourself anymore, what is this?" You find that the defilements, even though they have their reasons, have pretty bad reasons. If you can ferret them out and examine them, you begin to see where the reasons fall apart.

They're like people who know that their reasons are bad, so they get more and more insistent, just like politicians who have got nothing really good to say, so what they do have to say, they say very loudly, very insistently, as if it's just through sheer volume and force of will that they're going to beat down their opponents. Well, the mind has those types of politicians inside as well.

Here, again, is where you have to be patient, and show that you have some stamina, that you're not going to give in.

But as for which techniques are going to work, which techniques are not going to work, that's up to you to test for yourself. You have to learn to read your own mind: That's a large part of discernment. You learn how to read what works and what doesn't work. Some things may work for a while, then not work. Okay, then come back again. Don't get discouraged. We're dealing with complex problems.

It's not the case that unskillful actions have only one root. Often they have many roots, and they spread out in all kinds of directions. But you can take comfort in the fact that when you've pulled out one root, at least you've weakened the plant for a while. It puts you in a better position to come back and look at those roots again, and again, and again.

As Ajaan Mun said in his final sermon, the most important thing in the practice is to keep up the determination that you're not going to come back and suffer again. Now, that determination depends on your sense of possibilities, that it really is possible to bring the mind to a point where it doesn't have to suffer, and that it really is possible for you to do this. You realize this is going to be a big job, but, as with any big job, you learn how to break it down into small pieces, into manageable pieces, and just work on them one by one. Work on what you can manage. And don't hope for the magic bullet that's going to make all the problems go away at once.

If you develop a mature attitude toward the practice, the attitude in and of itself gives you a lot of stamina. It makes it easier to deal with the ups and downs as they come. You don't have to go up with the ups, or down with the downs. You learn how to keep the mind on an even keel. Like that story they tell of, I think he was a Korean monk or a Japanese monk, accused by a woman of getting her pregnant. When the accusations came, he said, "Is that so?" That was it. He didn't defend himself or anything else. When she had the child, she came and put it on his doorstep, and said, "Okay, it's yours. You've got to raise it." He said, "Is that so?" So he raised it. Then, several years later, she came back and confessed, "I'm sorry, it wasn't really your child. I knew all along." He said, "Is that so?" And gave the child back.

You've got to develop that attitude in your mind: "Is that so?" When things are good: "Is that so?" When things are bad: "Is that so?" That helps cut through a lot of problems. That way, when things go really well, you're not fooled by the reality of what seems to be good. You want to say, "Is that really good? Well, let's watch for a while." When things get bad again, "Are

they really bad? Well, let's watch for a while." That attitude right there does an awful lot to carry you through.

Patience & Urgency

July 26, 2009

We're both lucky and unlucky that there are so many books on the practice. Lucky in the sense that we get to hear the message that it is possible to put an end to suffering, that it is possible through the development of virtue, concentration, and discernment to find something deathless. We're unlucky because we tend to bring all these notions into the practice and we want to see the results right away. We have everything all figured out, and it's simply a matter of: "How quickly can we get through all the preliminaries so we can get to all that good stuff at the end?"

That attitude is a defilement. And this presents us with a paradox: In the texts, the Buddha says that, as you come to the practice, you have to be like a person who finds that his hair is on fire. You have to put it out as quickly as you can. You can't wait. So we should have a sense of urgency, but at the same time, we can't allow that urgency to turn into impatience. Because there are definite steps to the practice, and, as we practice, we find that our abilities grow a lot more slowly than we might expect. If you try to push the practice too much, you end up spoiling it.

One of the images in the Canon is of a woman who's pregnant and she wants to have a baby monkey for her baby to play with. She asks her husband to get the baby monkey, and he asks her what color to dye the baby monkey? Blue or pink? She gets impatient and cuts open her womb to see whether it's a baby boy or a baby girl. Of course, you know what happens: She dies and the fetus dies as well.

You don't want that to happen in your meditation. The best way to express your urgency without impatience is not to focus on the goal. Focus on what you're doing right now. You've got this breath, so try to be as sensitive as possible to this breath. Where is this going to take you? You know it's going to take you someplace good. How long is it going to take? You don't know. But you do know that the only way you're going to find the goal is by focusing very intently on the path. Because the practice isn't a mechanical process where you simply force on the mind through the meat

grinder and you come out with nibbana as the product. The technique is here to develop your powers of perception, to develop your powers of concentration, so that you can use your discernment to figure things out more clearly for yourself. If you rush through things, discernment doesn't have its chance to develop its skill, doesn't have its chance to develop its powers of observation.

What happens all too often when you're in too great hurry is that you go for the shortcut, and the shortcut can often lead you astray. You need to be very careful in what you do. Now, this doesn't mean that you have to walk around slowly all the time and act like a ninety-year-old man. It means that you simply have to pay very careful attention to your actions, to your words, to your thoughts. Because your thoughts come quickly, you have to be quick in your discernment, quick in your alertness.

And you have to learn how to judge things. The judgment here is especially important when you find issues in the mind that you would like to deal with really quickly. Something is bothering you and eating away at part of your mind, and you'd like to get done with it. Fast. But some things can't be handled fast. They take time. This is where your discernment comes in. To develop discernment, you have to develop your powers of concentration. An important stage in the practice is saying No to any other thought that comes up. If you're going to think, think about the breath, evaluate the breath, play with the breath, get to know it really well. The only way you can really know the breath is by playing with it, trying to make it comfortable. If it's not comfortable, try other ways of making it comfortable. Keep trying to figure out, if things are not going well, what's a new approach to try?

You can read in Ajaan Lee's writings where he talks about the different levels of the breath, and the various types of breath energy in the body. He has lots of different ways of analyzing this energy. In some cases, he talks about the blatant breath, i.e., the in-and-out breath, and then the more refined breath: the breath sensations flowing through the nerves, and then the subtle breath, which is the still breath, the breath that doesn't move at all. At other times, he talks about the breath sensations going up, going down, moving in, moving out, spinning around in place. There's another place where he talks about the strong breath energy coming up the spine, and another weaker breath energy going from the navel up to the nose.

These ways of conceiving the breath are useful in different circumstances. And you might find that you have other ways of conceiving the breath that are useful for some of your problems. So you try out his ways of analysis, and that will lead you to think of other ways as well. You've got to develop your ingenuity as you deal with the breath. But as for anything else that comes up while you're getting to know the breath, you don't want it to interfere.

Then, when you feel that your concentration is strong enough, you may want to test it. One way of testing it is to bring in a difficult issue—"Okay, let's think about it for a while"—with the purpose of using your concentration to observe: How does the mind approach that issue? How does it relate to that issue? At what point does it move into it and take it on as a state of becoming? What are the attractions of that issue? Why do you feel compelled to keep going back to it? What are the drawbacks of holding on to that issue? If it's something bothering you, exactly what is it related to? What about it bothers you? Which part of your sense of identity is it threatening? Do you have to hold on to that particular sense of identity? Is it something really solid?

You want to get to the point where you can see these things simply arising and passing away: They come in; they go away. There's nothing given about your identity. It's totally your fabrication. And if it's a fabrication that's causing you to suffer, why do you want to keep doing it? Why do you want to hold on to it?

These are some of the questions you can ask.

But you may find that as soon as you bring up the issue, all those questions just disappear, and you move into the same old mood that there was before. That's a sign that your concentration is not equal to it yet. You have to be able to notice this, recognize it, and then use whatever skills you've learned in developing concentration to drop the issue and treat it as you would any other distraction. In other words, you have to learn how to recognize what you're ready for and what you're not.

We like to think ideally that we're all great Dhamma warriors, and with any issue that comes up, we should be brave and handle it. But as any skilled warrior knows, you can't take on any enemy at any time. You have to choose your battles. You have to be prepared. An important lesson that many of our leaders tend to forget is: If you have plans to go in and make an

attack, you also have to have plans for how you're going to retreat safely if things don't go well. So always be ready for the idea that you may have to retreat when you find that the thought you're analyzing suddenly turns on you, and you find yourself dropping all of your tools. You're not just going to stand there and let it eat you up. You have to run away. That's not a sign of cowardice. It's a sign of intelligence. But you've got to have a good, safe place to run away to.

This is what the concentration is for. It creates a sense of well-being in the mind, a sense of belonging right here. You're not going to let anybody else come and push you out of this seat. No matter how insistent the thought, you're going to stay right here. If it's a physical pain, no matter how insistent the pain, you're going to stay right here with the breath, fully inhabiting your body, trying to get the sense of security that can come from staying right here until you're ready to tackle the thought again, tackle the pain again.

Now, in some cases these issues come up willy-nilly, and you've got to deal with them somehow. You can't wait until you're fully ready. But then you're going to have to learn to recognize how to give it a quick karate chop, enough to take care of it for the time being; realizing that you haven't uprooted it, you haven't fully understood it, but at least you've got it somewhat under control, using the discernment you've got.

It's in this way that you strengthen your discernment. Because it's not always the case that you can wait until the discernment is fully strong and ready to tackle the big issues. You have to develop your discernment bit by bit, all along the way.

A good comparison is with lifting weights. You can't just sit around and wait until your arms are strong and then lift the heavy weights. You take your weak arm, your scrawny arm, and use it to lift the weights that you can manage. Then gradually you build up your strength, and you find that you can lift bigger and bigger weights. That's how a weak arm becomes a strong arm.

It's the same with discernment. You use what weak discernment you have to tackle the issues you can manage. As you do this, you find that, over time, you can tackle more and more complicated issues. But this also requires that you have concentration to retreat to when you need it to nourish yourself. Again, like lifting weights: If you just lift the weights

without eating and nourishing the body, the muscle wears out. You've got to nourish yourself, you've got to feed yourself, so that you have the strength to make your next attack. Concentration is nourishment. Concentration is a safe place for the mind.

An important way to develop discernment around this is to see: What can you handle? What can you not? If you can't handle a particular issue, admit the fact: Tell yourself that you're not ready for that yet, and then retreat into concentration to build yourself up for the next attack.

In other words, an important part of the practice is not trying to clone the goal. You want to be really clear about where you are, which powers you have developed, which ones you haven't. This right here is a lot of what discernment means: being very clear, very focused, very observant of what you're capable of handling right now. The path isn't a matter of simply hoping for the goal, and pushing, pushing, pushing in the direction where you think it lies. It's a matter of focusing on what you have to do right now—and in being very focused on each step as you do it, very clear about each step as you do it. You develop the mindfulness, alertness, the ability to observe, all of which are going to be needed to see through to the deathless, to see through to the goal that you want.

So don't just push yourself through the motions, hoping that somehow the techniques are going to take care of everything. You have to develop your discernment around the techniques if you want to get anywhere at all.

Fabricating with Awareness

August 10, 2012

When the Buddha explains the causes of suffering, he starts with ignorance, and from ignorance he goes on to fabrication. In other words, it's because we fabricate out of ignorance: That's why we suffer. Everything else follows from that.

Now, the cure is to replace the ignorance with knowledge, knowledge in terms of the four noble truths: exactly what is suffering or stress, what its cause is, the fact that it can be ended by eliminating the cause, and then the path to practice that can eliminate the cause. You know these things and you apply them to the fabrication of your experience: That's the path. Ultimately, when your knowledge is complete, the mind no longer fabricates. At least at the moment of awakening there's no fabrication at all.

But to get there, you have to fabricate with knowledge. That's how you develop your knowledge: You apply your knowledge to the way you fabricate the body through the breath, the way you fabricate speech through your mental chatter—which is basically directed thought and evaluation—and then the way you fabricate the mind through feelings and perceptions. You bring knowledge to these practices so that you get a sense of where they're causing suffering and where they're not, where they're engaged in craving and clinging, and where they're a part of the path. You test your knowledge through fabricating, you see the results, and then you make your knowledge more and more refined. This is how your knowledge becomes a skill.

It's interesting that the word the Buddha uses here, avijja, is the negative of vijja. Vijja can mean not only knowledge, but also the kind of skills that, say, a doctor or an animal trainer would have. And the Buddha often compares himself to a doctor and to a trainer. Basically, you want to become your own doctor, your own trainer.

So you look at how you fabricate and then you train that fabrication to be part of the path. As the Buddha says, there are two ways you can overcome the causes of suffering. In some cases, you just watch them and, as in Ajaan Lee's phrase, they get embarrassed and they go away. In other

cases, you have to exert a fabrication. In other words, you learn how to use these processes of bodily, verbal, and mental fabrications with knowledge to counteract the greed, aversion, and delusion of the mind—its different ways of craving and clinging.

These are your tools, and it's good to know your tools so that you can have them at hand if something unskillful comes up in the mind. Sometimes watching it long enough, you finally get tired of it. Yet that can sometimes take years. But if you realize you have tools, you can speed up the process.

We begin with the breath, which, after all, is bodily fabrication. Bring knowledge to how you breathe. Bring awareness to the fact that some ways of breathing actually aggravate your cravings, clingings, and suffering, and others alleviate them. That's applying the framework of the four noble truths right there: seeing the effect that the breath has on your mind, seeing the effect that the breath has on your body, and then learning to adjust it. You have that within your power. As you get more and more sensitive to the breath, you get more and more sensitive to the very subtle levels of fabrication in the mind.

This is why Ajaan Lee has you focus on the breath energy in the different parts of the body. The Canon doesn't speak about breath energy very much. It simply notes the fact that there is a type of wind element or wind property that goes throughout all the organs of the body. It talks about the diseases that come when that wind element gets upset. They're primarily the stabbing pains you sometimes feel in different parts of the body: in the stomach, in the intestines, in the back, anywhere in the body. That's a sign that there's a lot of heavy breath energy and it's blocked, so there's a lot of pressure. Because it's right in the nerves, there's a very stabbing quality to the pain.

Instead of just noting that that's one of the ways the mind and the body can suffer from the breath, you figure out: "What can I do to make the breath energy positive instead of negative?" When you think of all the breath channels in the body opening up, opening up—including the nerves and the blood vessels all the way out to the tips of the fingers, the tips of the toes—that really helps in the process of getting the mind to settle down. Because when there's a sense of ease or rapture that arises as the mind gets more and more quiet, one of the things you'll have to do is to allow it to spread

throughout the body. The easiest way to get it to spread throughout the body is by opening up the breath channels.

When you have this tool in your arsenal, you find that it's very useful for dealing with unskillful thoughts that come up in the mind with a very strong sense of urgency, insisting that you want this right now. Part of the body or the mind feels starved for some kind of pleasure. Well, you can breathe in a way that gives you that pleasure right now, by opening up all of the breath channels in the body. You may notice that some parts of the body, as you relax them and the breath goes through them, are especially helpful: Sometimes they'll be in the hands or the feet, because these are places where tension builds up very quickly when there's greed, lust, or anger.

So this is one of the ways in which you can counteract the force of those defilements by fabricating bodily fabrication.

Then there's a verbal fabrication: the way you talk to yourself about that particular defilement. When a very strong defilement comes into the mind, it's like a bully in the classroom. No matter how reasonable you are with it, the bully just pushes everything away, refuses to talk, refuses to listen to your reasoning. Then you start giving in to the bully: That's where you go wrong. You have to realize that the bully doesn't have nearly as much power as he thinks he does. If the bully is stubborn, you can be stubborn too.

Just keep thinking about other things: the opposite of whatever would aggravate that particular defilement. If it's lust, you start thinking about the unattractive side of the body and about all the unskillful things you do under the power of lust. Remind yourself there's nothing really gained by lustful thinking. In other words, you talk to yourself in a different way. You don't allow the conversation to be totally taken over by the bully. And you find that some of the bully's reasonings prove to be pretty hollow.

For instance, the bully might say, "You'll have to give into me at in five minutes anyhow, so you might as well give in now and get it over with." You don't have to agree with that. You say, "I'm not responsible for five minutes from now, but I am responsible for right now. And for right now I'm going to say 'no.'" In other words, think in ways that are even more stubborn than the bully. As you do that, you'll find that a lot of the bully's reasons that used to be so convincing or so overwhelming prove pretty hollow. As for your conviction that you had to give in to the desire or the anger, there's no "had

to" there at all. There's just one part of the mind bullying another part of the mind.

So you reframe the issue, think in different terms, and at the very least you can withstand the power of that thought. You begin to see that there are other sides to the equation. For instance, when lust comes up and the bully says, "Okay, the body needs this," remember that the body doesn't need anything. The body is perfectly willing to die. It'll die if you let it. It'll have hunger pains and a lot of other pains, but the body itself doesn't really care. It's the mind that cares, and it's the mind that wants these things. The body is just a tool in the mind.

So the problem is not the body, it's the lust in the mind: Why would it lust for these things? What does he gain? Is lust in and of itself a comfortable emotion? No, it's not. It just forces your nerves and puts pressure on your nerves, and then you look for some sort of release. But, again, if you can use your breath to help your verbal fabrication here, you can release a lot of that pressure, and the whole thing seems pointless—all the demands that the bully made.

This is one of the ways you can use verbal fabrication, together with bodily fabrication, to help see through the false reasoning of the defilements.

Finally, there's mental fabrication: your feelings and perceptions. Again, the breath is helpful here. You can create feelings of ease and well-being throughout the body, which will have a really healthy effect on the mind. You look at greed, aversion, and delusion, and you begin to realize that they're not worth the effort they require because there's already a sense of well-being. The reason you ordinarily give in to these things is because they promise a greater sense of ease and well-being, a greater pleasure than what you have. But if you can create feelings of pleasure as you need them with the way you direct your thoughts to the breath and the way you evaluate the breath, then those other demands will weaken.

Then there are your perceptions: the mental images by which you label things. These are really important: the pictures we use as we think about the world, think about the body, think about the mind, think about greed, aversion, delusion, in the mind. What are the underlying images? Do you have an image of yourself as being constantly starved for well-being? That you're harried and harassed by your daily life? And you need some sort of

fix? Can you change the perception? After all, here you are: You're a master of your breathing. You're in control.

When you get angry about somebody else's misbehavior, what's your perception of yourself at that moment? The judge who has the right to pass judgment on other people? Is that the situation you're really in? Because the Buddha said it's better to regard yourself as a person walking through a desert. You're tired, hot, trembling, exhausted, you need water. If you find a little bit of water anywhere, you should be willing to drink it. In other words, focus on the good points of other people. Even if you admit that they have their bad points, you don't let them spoil your mind. After all, if you see other people as being totally bad, it's hard to treat them with justice or fairness. You simply see yourself as the victim or as the judge. There's that perception in the back of the mind that colors everything you're going to do and say in that situation. If the perception will lead you to do something unskillful, change the perception.

Or if somebody insults you: Do you perceive that your honor has been besmirched, that you've got to fight back? The Buddha gives you another perception: Someone has offered to you bad food. If you don't take it, then it's theirs. You're not poisoned by it.

This is one of the reasons we read the texts: to acquire more skillful perceptions to apply to the different situations in life. There's that image of the person pinned down by bandits. They're going to saw off his arms and legs, and the Buddha says that even when you're in a situation like that, if you allow yourself to feel ill will for the bandits, you're not following the teaching. Learn how to spread goodwill even to those people: Practice that perception in your mind. When you've been able to practice that in your mind, then when you meet up with the little problems here and there in the world, it's a lot easier to feel goodwill for people in spite of the problems they cause. And remember what goodwill is. That, too, is a good perception to hold in mind. It's not that you just think, "May you be happy whatever you're doing." It means, "May you understand the causes of true happiness, and may you act on them." That kind of goodwill you can wish for anybody.

So avail yourself of these tools. Learn to use your bodily fabrications, your verbal fabrications, your mental fabrications with knowledge. After all, the mind is fabricating things anyhow. In fact, it's this process of fabrication that we bring to our experience of the world. We prime ourselves to see

things in certain ways, or hear things in certain ways, or smell, taste them, experience their physical contact in certain ways, to think about them in certain ways, because of the way the mind has already started fabricating things, even prior to the sensory contact. And because that often happens with ignorance, we suffer even when those contacts are good. But if you understand this point—that if you bring knowledge to this process of fabrication, then you're bringing good fabrications, skillful fabrications to your awareness and to other things around you—that right there alleviates a lot of the suffering.

You're using your wisdom, you're using your understanding not just to take note of things, but also to realize that you're already shaping them, so shape them in a good way. Shape them so that they can be a path rather than just one more instance of one more cycle through craving and suffering. You've got the choice, so always keep that in mind—and make the best use of it.

The Arrow in the Heart

August 17, 2012

A Thai poet, Sunthorn Phu, once wrote an adventure tale as a favor to a princess. The princess liked the tale so much that she asked for more installments. Originally, Sunthorn Phu had planned to end the poem after a couple of adventures, but she wasn't willing to have it end. She kept asking for more. So the tale went on and on and on. Instead of having a nice narrative arc, it started to sprawl. And if I remember correctly, the only reason it ended was because the princess died.

When you read the poem, it's not like a regular story. It's more like life: just one thing after another. It keeps on going and going and going. If the princess hadn't died so soon, it probably would have kept on going.

That's the way life is. It doesn't have a nice arc. It doesn't have a nice, series of closures. The human mind just keeps going on as long as there's craving and clinging. Even when this body ends, craving and clinging can create a bridge to a new body and a new life. When major events happen in our life, we often look for closure, but the world just doesn't have any real closure to offer. The only place we can find closure is inside.

If someone passes away, we do want to honor that person. At the very least, make a statement of the goodness that that person had, because we don't want to see it disappear. We don't want to have it go unstated. The memory of other people's goodness helps to nourish more goodness in the world, so we want that goodness to be remembered. And that's an honorable thing. But we have to realize that things don't stop there. Our lives have to go on. The other person's life is going on someplace else. We have no idea where.

This is why the Buddha said that there is no closure until you can find a way to become, as in the sutta we just chanted now, "through lack of clinging, released." The clinging and craving are what keep us going. Only through the practice can we gain release and find refuge. Only in the Dhamma can all boats can find harbor, and all hearts find rest.

Otherwise, there's that impetus in the mind and impetus in the heart that just keeps going, looking for: What's next? What's next? We plow our way through one life, and then it's not enough. We keep on going for another one to plow through, and then for another one and then another. As the Buddha said, it's very hard to meet someone who hasn't been your mother or your father, your sister or your brother, your son, or your daughter in the course of all these many, many lives. Our relationships have been shuffled around so much that it's overwhelming.

Note that the Buddha never used that reflection as a reason for arguing that we should love everybody because they'd been our mother at some point. He used it more as a reflection to give rise to a sense of terror—samvega. Craving just keeps going on like this, to who knows where. There's so much of it, it's terrifying. But along with samvega, this reflection can also give rise to a desire for release.

This is why we come to the practice, realizing that this is the only place where we're going to find any refuge. We talk about taking the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as our refuge. We do that in the sense of taking the life of the Buddha, the life of the members of the noble Sangha, as our example. We take the Dhamma as our guidance, so we can give rise to the qualities in the Buddha's heart, in the hearts of the noble Sangha, within our heart, within our own lives. Those qualities will provide our genuine refuge.

So drop all your other thoughts. Come to find rest right here: the breath coming in, the breath going out. Even though there's still clinging and craving in the process of staying with the breath, it's the kind of clinging and craving that will lead you out. As we create a sense of concentration, a sense of being settled and established here, it's called a state of becoming. As that word becoming indicates, it doesn't stop. It's a process; it keeps going. But this kind of becoming is quiet enough so that you can look into your mind and see: Where is that arrow that keeps us from settling down?

There's a really poignant passage in the Canon where the Buddha said that prior to his awakening he looked at life and he saw it as a puddle of water. The water was drying up, drying up, and it was filled with fish fighting one another for that last little gulp of the water. All he could feel was samvega. Then he asked himself, "Where is the source of this problem?" It wasn't that we should have more water. The problem came because there was an arrow in the heart, the arrow that keeps pointing forward, pointing

forward, for further becoming, and stabbing us at the same time. That's what we've got to pull out. And as he said, that's what he pulled out with his awakening.

So, what's the first thing you've got to do when you've been wounded by an arrow and you want to pull it out? You have to relax around the arrow. The more you fight and tense up around it, the more damage it does. The more it pains you. This is why we get the mind into a state of concentration. It's like relaxing around an arrow so as to minimize the pain in the mind and make it easier for us to pull it out.

Even though concentration is not the ultimate ease and it's not the ultimate happiness, still it gives us a period of rest and the ability to gather our strength to deal with all the things that keep coming at us.

So take rest right here. Learn to cultivate a sense of well-being even around this arrow that's stabbing your heart: the arrow of clinging, craving, and all the specific clingings and cravings we have right now. Try not to shoot yourself with extra arrows. Learn how to relax around that arrow that's there so that you can learn how to recognize it for what it is. When you recognize it, then it's a lot easier to pull it out and not grab it as your own, not grab it as an essential feature in your heat.

Learn to find what other potential there is for ease in the moment, respite in the moment, and cultivate that. That's our duty with regard to the path. It's not the case that, when concentration comes, you just watch it come and watch it go and say, "Oh, yes, we've learned something about impermanence or inconstancy." Your duty with regard to concentration is to develop it. You should make it strong enough to be your refuge. You cultivate it: You try to make it come and to keep it from going.

To make it come, you find where your potential for stillness is—in the body, in the mind. Then you apply appropriate attention to cultivate or appreciate that potential and make the most of it. Even though it isn't your ultimate refuge, it is your resting spot along the way. You can rest, gain nourishment, renew your strength, so that you can continue in the right direction. Otherwise, life is just a wandering on: lost in the forest. Wounded and lost in the forest. Whereas if you're on the path, there's a way out and the arrow can be removed.

Unskillful Thinking

November 24, 2004

The practice of concentration often goes best when you treat it as a game, something you do for enjoyment. After all, some of the factors of right concentration include pleasure and rapture, and these things don't arise if you treat the concentration as a chore, as something grim you have to slog your way through.

So make it a pleasant challenge. How long can you stay with the breath? If thoughts come in, can you shoot them down in the same way you'd shoot down enemy aircraft in a video game? In other words, when a thought comes in, don't be too quick to get into the thought. See it as an event, as something that comes and goes, and if you get inside it, you've been trapped. You want to stay outside the thought. So whatever thoughts come up—good thoughts, bad thoughts, thoughts about the past, thoughts about the future—just shoot them down. In other words, you know they're there, but you don't have to get involved. If you don't get involved, they go away.

This is an important lesson in training the mind, seeing that you can choose whether to get involved with your thoughts. You don't have to follow them around wherever they go. After all, a lot of your thoughts are just random firings of nerves in your brain. You try to make sense out of them, you try to get a sense of who you are by interpreting those thoughts, and it's pretty liberating to realize that you don't have to do that. You can stand apart from the thoughts. Use the breath as your foundation, stay with the breath coming in, stay with the breath going out. Try to be as alert as possible. Again, it's like playing a game. If you're not alert, you get shot down. Try to keep your awareness all around. The whole body breathes in; the whole body breathes out. Sometimes thoughts sneak up on you from behind, so watch out for those.

As you keep at this, you gain a sense of the pleasure that comes from having mastered a skill. In the beginning, the thoughts will come in and they'll drag you away before you realize what's happened. You give into them because you don't really realize that you have the choice to go with

them or not. You don't notice the moment when you make that choice. But if you stay with the breath and make your goal for the hour to watch to see exactly when it is that you go along with the thought, you begin to clearly see that there really is a choice. This in and of itself is a really good skill to master because a lot of thoughts can get you depressed, they can get you angry, they really get in the way of any clarity in your mind. If you realize that you have the choice to go with them or not as you like, you're in a position of freedom. You're over them rather than their being over you.

Treat this as a game. See if you can sidestep from the thoughts, escape from the thoughts, by staying with the breath.

At the same time, you learn about the breathing. If you're going to think about anything, think about the breath. Ask yourself: Is this breath comfortable? What's the difference between a comfortable breath and an uncomfortable breath? You can experiment breathing in different ways, and after a while you'll see that right now the body likes this kind of breathing. It doesn't like that kind of breathing.

Look for yourself. Learn to use your own powers of observation. This is another way in which the practice is liberating. This is an area where you're in charge, where you're the expert. You know when the breath is coming in, you know when it's going out, you know when it's comfortable, whether you like it—you also know when you don't like it. You're also in a position where, if you don't like it, you can change it. Nobody's forcing you to breathe in an uncomfortable way.

This means that wherever you are, you don't have to be bored. You've always got something to look into: How is the breath energy going in the body? They say that the breath energy can be felt all the way down to the toes. Can you feel it? So when you're sitting around doing nothing, you don't have to do nothing, you can watch your breath, you can play with the breath, you can learn about the breath. At the same time, you can play with sidestepping your thoughts.

In this way, you can enjoy the present moment and develop important skills at the same time. Because as you grow older you find that your biggest enemy is often your own mind. All kinds of weird thoughts can come in, making you misunderstand things. When you misunderstand them, the things that shouldn't make you upset get you upset. Things that shouldn't

make you suffer make you suffer. Yet it's not really that they're making you suffer: You're making yourself suffer over them. That's the problem.

As the Buddha pointed out, there are two kinds of suffering in the world. There's the natural suffering of having a body, of having a mind that's full of change. Then there's unnatural suffering, which is the suffering that comes from craving, wanting things to be the way they can't be at all. The second one is not only unnatural but also unnecessary.

It's important that we learn how to distinguish between these two kinds of suffering and stress. After all, stress in the body is natural. There's always going to be stress; there's always going to be pain. And if you think about it carefully, you realize there's always going to be illness of one kind or another in the body. The body never functions perfectly. When you're born, you're born with the need for all kinds of things.

That's why we have that chant on the four requisites: food, clothing, shelter, medicine. These are things the body lacks. As the Buddha once said, the greatest disease is hunger, and it's there every day, every day, every day. Then we develop other diseases on top of that. The diseases in the body are normal. We have a chant that says aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal, these are the normal things that happen to bodies. And when you latch on to a body and claim it as yours, and don't want it to get old, or sick, or dead, you're going to suffer.

So the problem is not so much with the body, it's with the mind's attitudes. This is what we've got to work on.

Often we miss the illness in the body because we're distracted by other things. I was reading a while back a book on Zen monks Korea. The monks there seem to be really obsessed with their health. The same is often true with the monks in Thailand. They've got a lot of time to sit there and look at their present moment. What do you see in the present moment? Well, there's a pain here, there's a discomfort there, a lack of energy here, frenetic energy there.

If you're distracted by other things, you don't see them. But if you're sitting there in the present moment with nothing else to look at, there it is, staring you right in the face: The body is a nest of disease. It's always going to be that way, always has been that way. If the disease is one you can cure, you cure it; you don't just sit around and let it happen. But you find that there are a lot of things you just can't change about the body.

So you have the choice: Do you want to identify with it or not? If you let the mind be ill, the mind is going to go around latching on to other things to identify with, and then it gets itself even worse off. This is why we're working on the health of the mind. If you can learn how not to fall prey to your thoughts, you find the mind doesn't grow ill at all.

The illnesses of the mind are like the illnesses of the body in that they come from two things: one, germs from the outside; and, two, a lack of resistance from the inside. In other words, sometimes ideas come in from outside and they just get lodged in our minds. Or sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations come from the outside, get lodged in our minds, and start to fester. And, as with the body, if your powers of resistance are up, these things don't fester, they don't cause any disease.

The diseases here, of course, are greed, anger, and delusion; or passion, aversion, and delusion. If you learn how to develop your mindfulness, alertness, and discernment, you build up your resistance, so that when a sight comes into the eyes, you can see it for what it is. It's just a very ephemeral kind of thing. It's there for just an instant and then it's gone, and then it's replaced by another one, and another one. Yet some people devote their whole lives to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—these things that keep slipping out of their grasp like water going through their fingers.

If you haven't built up your powers of alertness, you're sure to fall for these things. They're sure to spark greed, anger, and delusion in the mind. But if you learn to be really mindful, you can see the whole process of sensory perception: how sights come in, what the mind does with the sights, how sounds are sensed, and what the mind does with the sounds. You begin to see what an artificial process the whole thing is. You realize you wouldn't want to build the happiness of your life on things that are so fleeting. This is how you build up your resistance.

The same goes with ideas. We pick up a lot of ideas from outside, and then we concoct our own from the inside. If we're not careful to check them, they can get lodged deep in our minds and start to fester, bubbling up with weirder ideas that lead us to misunderstand things. But if you notice these thoughts as they arise, and instead of latching on to every thought that comes into your mind as being your idea, you can ask yourself: "Do you really believe this? Is this really worthwhile to you? If you followed the

thought, where would it take you?" Some things are true, but they're not worth thinking about.

This is one of the Buddha's most important insights. He said when he was speaking, he would speak only things that were true and useful. He would also find the right time to say things, because some true and useful things are pleasing and others are displeasing. So he would find the right time to say pleasing things and the right time to say displeasing things. If something was true but wasn't of any real benefit, he wouldn't talk about it at all.

Well, you should take the same attitude toward your thinking. If something is true but has no real benefit to you, then why think about it? You also try to find a sense of time and place for your thinking. Some thoughts are useful at some times, and at other times they're not. So learn how to examine your thinking in this way: What kind of thinking is skillful, true, and beneficial? What kind of thinking is not?

And ask yourself why you're attached to unskillful thinking. It's like a letting an enemy into your house. You've got a traitor inside. Do you really want to hang around with that kind of thinking? Look as much as you can at the drawbacks of that kind of thinking, and it gets easier, and easier, and easier to give up. At the same time, hang around with the good and useful thinking that gives you a sense of well-being. Because if you don't have that sense of well-being, it's hard to let go of the other things you're addicted to.

When you can look at your thoughts, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas in these ways, you can ask yourself: Are they really useful? They might be true, but they may not be useful. If they're not useful, then why bother? Even if they might be useful in the abstract, are they useful right now? That's the other question.

When you can step back from your thoughts in this way, you're not so totally identified with them. That tendency you have for picking up germs gets weaker and weaker. You have a stronger and stronger defense against infection in the mind. When the mind is kept healthy like this, then the issues of what's going on in the body get less and less and less oppressive. There may be pain, but if you're not thinking about it in the wrong way, it's not going to affect the mind. There may be disappointment, but if you learn not to identify with these thoughts, learn not to identify with the diseases,

either in the body or the mind, they have no place to latch on. When your powers of resistance are strong like this, you can go anywhere you want.

These are some of the advantages that come from learning how to train the mind, starting out with this game of concentration to see: Can you stay with the breath for a whole minute? Then, can you do it for two minutes? Three? Five? Ten? See if you can do it for a whole hour. Then, when you've done it, you find that the mind is a lot more interesting a place to be than it was before. You're in charge. You can protect yourself from all the diseases that come in, and all the germs that would come in through your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and your mind. Of course, there may still be diseases in the body, but as long as there are no diseases in the mind, then the diseases in the body don't matter because the mind is the important part. The mind is what makes all the difference in the world.

Unlearning Unskillful Behavior

April 14, 2011

When you read the autobiographies of the forest ajaans, it's hard not to be struck about how many times they make vows in their practice. They stay up all night to accomplish something. They're very much goal oriented, and goal directed—which can often be a sharp contrast to the way people are taught to practice here: "Simply be in the present moment, have no expectations, have no goals." But if you're going to take the practice on as a lifelong practice, you've got to have goals. You've got to have reasons. You've got to have hopes that it's going to go to a good place. Once you've chosen a wise goal, you have to learn how to relate to it wisely as well. And a lot of that means not getting discouraged by setbacks.

I heard a story once about a Zen master in the Midwest who had a student who was going to come here to the West Coast to try his luck in Hollywood. The Zen master asked him, "What are you going to do if they knock you down?" The guy said, "Well, probably just accept that that's my kamma." The Zen master said, "No. They knock you down, you get back up again. They knock you down a second time, you get back up a second time. If this is something you really want, do everything you can to get there." That's the attitude you have to take in the practice. You can't let setbacks knock you off course or discourage you.

Instead, learn to look at your behavior and ask yourself, "Okay, what needs to be changed? What needs to be redirected?" Build on your strengths, but also be very honest about your weaknesses, and think about what you can do to overcome those weaknesses.

There are those four aspects of right effort: abandoning unskillful states that have already arisen, preventing unskillful states that haven't yet arisen from arising, giving rise to skillful states, and then, once a skillful state has been brought into being, you try to maintain it and develop it. That second one—preventing unskillful states from arising—is one that tends to get sloughed over too much because it does involve planning. You have to learn how to look at yourself and see: Where are your unskillful habits most easily

provoked? Anticipate that you're going to have those situations again, and ask yourself: What are you going to do? You've got to plan.

This is one aspect of the practice that really is future-oriented. You take into account the past, and you ask yourself: "When I go in this particular situation, when I meet with these particular people, they know where my buttons are. What can I do to make sure they don't push those buttons? Or if they do push the buttons, how can I learn how to react in a more skillful way?" Then think about people who've been in similar situations, and have behaved in a skillful way.

For many of us, the problem is we don't have very good examples. This is why living with a teacher is important. If the teacher is good, the teacher will set good examples, the sorts of things you can't learn in a book. But if you don't have that kind of person around all the time, then you do have to look in books sometimes. This is why, in the past, people encouraged their children to read literature, especially back in the days when literature taught you about people who had faced obstacles and overcome them. They wanted you to read about real heroes and heroines to get an idea about how you might face your own obstacles and overcome them as well.

So it's often a useful practice—if you know that you're going to go into a situation where you tend to react in an unskillful way—to tell yourself at the beginning of a meditation, "At the end of the meditation, I'm going to think about this." Get that image firmly in mind: what the situation is, what the problem is, what your unskillful reactions have been, why you engage in them. Just pose that question in the mind, and then drop it to the side. Focus on the breath. Try to get the mind as concentrated and still as you can. If any nibblings of that thought come up in the course of the hour, say, "No, not yet, not yet. Wait until the mind is in better shape."

Then, at the end of the hour, give yourself some time to think it through, and see what ideas you come up with. Some of them may be pretty flimsy strategies, but at least you're starting in the right direction. You're recognizing a real problem and you're doing what you can to work toward a solution. There's no guarantee that the meditation will give you an instant or trustworthy insight. But if you work through different scenarios enough, you can come up with some that, at the very least, remind you that, "If so and so says this, you just keep quiet, don't react, regardless." If the mind says, "Well, it sounds like I'm going to lose out to them," say, "No, you're

going to lose out to your defilements if you react. It's much worse to lose out to your defilements than to lose out to other people."

The same principle applies to your meditation. If you know you have certain problems focusing on the breath, focusing on getting the breath to be comfortable, ask yourself, "In what ways am my conceiving this problem in a way that's keeping me trapped?" I was talking recently to someone who was of the opinion that you had to get the breath energy really nice all the way throughout the body before you could think of spreading your awareness to fill the body. Now, that kind of assumption really traps you. If you can't get certain parts of the body to feel comfortable, then you can't really spread your awareness. There are bound to be times when sections of the body just don't respond. Allowing your awareness to spread, being conscious of the awareness that's already there, can actually help you overcome the problem. But if you tie your hands and say, "I can't spread my awareness there until the breath is good," you keep yourself hobbled.

So if you come up with a problem, ask yourself: "Is the way I conceive the problem, the problem itself? How about flipping it around, turning it inside out?" See if you get some new way of thinking about it.

If you're meditating and you've made up your mind that you're going to sit for a certain amount of time, and all of a sudden a certain thought defeats you, think about how you might get around that thought the next time, so that it doesn't.

This approach applies to all areas of life: addictions, problems in meditation, problems with people. You can't just push these things off to the side and hope that just by getting the technique of the meditation down, you're going to make those problems disappear. That's called spiritual bypassing, and it doesn't work. You can't bypass the everyday problems of how you engage with other people, how you engage with addictions, attachments, all your unskillful habits. You've got to think them through.

Think of the situations in which you tend to be unskillful, and then pose that question in the mind: "What would be a better way of dealing with these? Why am I tempted to behave in an unskillful way? What would be a better way?" That way, you're engaged in right effort—and right mindfulness, too.

So many people misunderstand mindfulness as meaning simply being aware of whatever comes up, and accepting whatever comes up. The

Buddha's definition was different, though: Mindfulness for him was keeping something in mind, keeping in mind what you've done, and the results you've experienced from what you've done—and also keeping in mind that you want to learn how to do it more skillfully. Then, based on that, you try to figure things out.

That's one of the ways in which dealing in past and future is an important part of the meditation. Thinking is an important part of the meditation. You're expanding your range of possibilities. You're learning how to abort unskillful habits. As you work on some of the more blatant ones, the subtler ones become easier. The spiritual bypassing approach is: "Let's deal with the subtle ones, and the blatant ones will just take care of themselves." But it rarely happens that way. If you're insensitive about things that you're blatantly doing in life, how are you going to muster the sensitivity to deal with your subtler attachments inside?

So if you see that you have an unskillful habit or an unskillful reaction that happens over and over again, sit down and think it through. Try to think of good examples you've seen in the past of people who have handled that situation well. Try to think of ways of thinking that will counteract your typical rationalizations for why you have to act in that way. Use the past as your lesson book, and set goals for the future.

It's all basic common sense, but all too often people throw their common sense away when they come to meditate. So remember that the teachings are a very consistent form of common sense, working on what is your responsibility, and putting aside things that are not your responsibility. Your unskillful habits are your responsibility, so do whatever you need to do to overcome them.

The Arrows of Emotion

April 21, 2010

There's a famous discourse when the Buddha talks about pain, how the wise person experiencing pain feels it as the pain that comes from being shot by one arrow. The person whose mind is not trained turns around and shoots himself with another arrow. But it's not really just one arrow—there are lots of arrows. There are all the emotional pains and the distress that we feel over physical pain. An important part of the practice is learning how to recognize that first arrow and not start shooting ourselves with all the other ones.

The same principle applies to emotional pain. A thought will come into the mind and spark a reaction, but then we choose to keep repeating that reaction, repeating the pain, piling on more and more problems, more and more arrows, with the various ways that we comment on the pain itself, the original impulse, and the processes that the mind is going through. These are more and more arrows that we keep shooting at ourselves. Particularly when the emotion has a strong hormonal reaction, it starts getting into the body. We then take the body as evidence that that emotion is still there, the feeling is still there, that pain is still there. And so we keep shooting ourselves again and again based on that reaction as well.

So an important part of the meditation is learning how to separate these things out, so that you see the initial impulse and realize that it's basically old kamma. We have this brain that has neurons firing all the time, so thoughts are bound to come up. Every now and then you trip over a thought that's really painful. There's nothing much you can do about that, it's just what happens. But it's what you do next: That's your kamma in the present moment, your new kamma.

This is where training the mind can make a big difference, helping you to see how you're shooting yourself. Again, it comes down to that old issue of seeing yourself do things that you know are not quite wise, but you don't know how to act in a different way. Or there's a stubbornness that refuses to

act in a different way. That's what requires patience, so that you don't merely jump on top of yourself and make things worse.

We have to remember as we're meditating that we're here to learn about the mind in hopes that someday our knowledge will enable us to develop more and more skillful habits. But sometimes you have to watch yourself doing something really stupid over and over again before you can catch sight of why you're doing it. That's where patience comes in. It's not just accepting things as they are and telling yourself, "Well this is the way they're going to be for the rest of my life." It doesn't accomplish much to simply sit there and watch yourself get angry for 20 years, or upset or lustful or whatever for 20 years, and just accept the fact that that's the way it's going to be. That doesn't accomplish anything. You have to learn how to watch the mind so that you can finally figure out: "Why am I doing this? It's painful, it's piling more and more suffering on top," until you can finally see: "Oh, this is why."

This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha was going to teach Rahula breath meditation, he didn't start out with the steps of breath meditation. He started out by saying: Make your mind like the earth, meditate to make your mind in tune with the earth—in the sense that people will throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn't react. Train your mind to be like wind. Wind blows disgusting things around, but the wind doesn't get upset. Train it to be like fire. Fire burns garbage, but the fire doesn't feel distaste at the garbage. Make your mind in tune with water. Water washes dirty things away, but the water itself isn't repelled by those dirty things. This is a quality of mind you want to develop so that you can face whatever comes up in the meditation, both the initial arrow, and all the other arrows that you shoot at yourself.

Try to develop some endurance. Say: "If I'm going to get past this, I have to understand it. If I'm going to understand it, I have to watch it. And to watch it with any kind of precision, I have to develop patience." A lot of the forest ajaans discovered that this is the quality they had to develop in their Western disciples before they could teach them anything else. Learn patience, a certain level of acceptance—not that that's the endpoint or the goal of the practice, but it's a means, it's a very important means for allowing us to observe the mind with more detachment, without self-incrimination.

In other words, we don't keep shooting more and more arrows at ourselves for shooting arrows at ourselves, in the way the mind tends to get stuck in a hall of mirrors. It reacts to its reaction to it to its reaction. The reflections just keep going on and on and on. That doesn't accomplish anything. We're here to learn. Whatever sense of self we're going to develop around the meditation, make it the sense of self that's willing to learn and is patient enough to see what's going on.

And to look at things we don't like to look at. Because after all, what's the duty with regard to stress and suffering? To comprehend it. How are you going to comprehend it? You have to watch it for long periods of time. In other words, you have to learn how to sit with it. That helps you to develop dispassion. Because that's what comprehension means: You understand something to the point where you feel dispassionate toward it. After all, we do have a lot of passion around our emotions. Even the unpleasant ones: We really like them in a strange way. So to understand our passions, we have to learn how to step back a bit.

This is what the concentration is for. This is why we try to develop mindfulness and alertness, and particularly to learn how to get a sense of well-being that goes with getting the mind in stillness, so that we can have the nourishment and strength to deal with the unpleasant things that are bound to come up. That way, even though there are arrows being shot, we keep watching, looking, trying to figure out: What's going on here? Why does the mind feed on these emotions? Why is it so quick to keep on shooting those arrows? We have to develop not only the patience to sit with these things, but also the clarity so that we can be faster than the arrows, so that we can see when an arrow is about to be shot and we know why.

A lot of interesting things going on here. That's the attitude we have to take towards these pains: to see them as interesting, a puzzle. Sometimes we sit here meditating, and when things are going well we get bored. All of a sudden there seems to be lots of space to do other things, as if nothing were happening right now. But a lot of things are happening. The breath is coming in and out, having an impact on your body. You're thinking and evaluating things. That, too, has an impact. Your internal speech, your feelings, and your perceptions are flashing in the mind. We stitch these things together and we forget what the raw materials are. We just look for

the finished product. We have a real talent for just keeping on stitching and stitching and stitching.

And what is the stitching? The Buddha says the stitching is craving.

This is all happening all the time, even when the mind is in a relatively peaceful state. One of the purposes of evaluating and playing with the breath is to bring that aspect of verbal fabrication up to the fore, to be clear about what you're thinking about and how you're fashioning your thoughts. You deal with the breath right here so that when the breath changes with an emotion, you're aware of it. You're on top of it.

So all these factors—breath, directed thought, evaluation, feelings and perceptions: We're trying to do them with as much knowledge as possible, so that when they go off into a different direction, we're sensitive to those functions of the mind. As we develop sensitivity to these functions, we begin to see more and more clearly what's going on. We come to realize that there's a lot of complex stuff happening in the present moment. Even when things seem relatively calm, and nothing suspicious is happening, you have to be on your guard. You have to watch carefully so that when something painful happens, you'll be prepared for it. You can see: This is how the mind takes a pain and then makes more pain out of it.

Try to take an interest in these processes. Get well acquainted with them. Because learning how to see these things as processes in the mind helps you deal with the pain when it comes. This way, not only do you have the patience and the endurance to sit with the pain and watch how it's happening, you've also got the right framework for figuring it out.

The more knowledge you bring to the process of fabrication, the less you suffer. If you can learn why you're shooting yourself with arrows, you can finally see through to the point where you realize you don't have to do that anymore. You've got better things to do.

A Refuge from Aging, Illness, & Death

July 22, 2012

There's a passage in the Canon that connects the teachings on aging, illness, and death, with the three teachings we chanted just now on inconstancy, stress, and not-self. A king, Koravya, is talking to Ven. Ratthapala, a monk, and asking Ratthapala why he had ordained. The king felt that most people ordained because of a loss in the family, loss of wealth, sickness, some disaster. But none of those applied in Ratthapala's case.

Ratthapala answers that he was inspired by four Dhamma summaries: The world is swept away; it does not endure. That's the teaching on inconstancy, and he illustrates it with aging. He asks the king, "When you were young, were you strong?" The king said, "Yes, I thought I had the strength of two people." "How about now?" "Oh, no, now I'm 80 years old, and sometimes I intend to put my foot in one place and it goes someplace else." So aging is the main inconstancy teaching.

The world has no shelter; there is no one in charge: That was another reason Ratthapala why ordained. The king asks him the meaning of that, and Ratthapala says, "Do you have any recurring illnesses?" The king says, "Yes, I have a recurring wind illness"—which means shooting pains in the body. "When you have this illness, can you ask your courtiers to share out some of the pain so that you don't have to suffer so much?" The king says, "Oh, no, I can't do that. I have to take on all of the pain on my own." So illness is the teaching on suffering and stress.

The third Dhamma summary: The world has nothing of its own; one has to pass on leaving everything behind. The king says, "I have a lot of wealth. What do you mean the world has nothing of its own?" Ratthapala says, "But when you die, can you take that with you?" "No, of course not." So death is the ultimate not-self teaching. The things we hold on to as "us" and "ours," if they don't leave us before we die, they leave us at death.

So when you think about those three perceptions—inconstancy, stress, and not-self—always think about what lies behind them: aging, illness, and death. Learn to think of these things as normal. There's that other chant we

often recite: "I'm subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death. I haven't gone beyond these things." In the Thai translation, "I am subject to these things" can also be translated as, "These things are normal." Aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal. They're happening all the time.

But we suffer because of that fourth Dhamma summary: We're a slave to craving. We keep coming back for more and more and more of the same old aging, illness, and death.

Ajaan Fuang once said that the sensual pleasures we hunger for are things we've had in the past. We miss them; we want them again. We forget about all of the suffering that goes on around those things. Of course, the fact that we're missing them now so intensely means that when we gain them again, we're going to lose them again, and suffer again, just as intensely. The question is: When are you going to have enough?

In the king's case, he had no sense of enough at all. He already had a kingdom and yet when Ratthapala asked him, "If somebody came and told you there was a kingdom to the east you could conquer, would you conquer it?" the king said, "Of course." "If somebody came from the south, the west, the north, with the same news: There are kingdoms all around that the king could conquer, would he want more? Of course. "What if someone were to come from the other side of the ocean, saying, 'There's a kingdom over there you could conquer,' would you take it?" The king says, "Of course." Here he is, eighty years old, and he still craves more power and wealth.

We may not be thinking about kingdoms, but our craving keeps us going in just the same way. The question always comes down to: When will you have enough? When would you be willing to look someplace else for your happiness? Of course, all of us have an inkling of that at least. That's why we're here meditating. We look inside instead of outside for a happiness that'll be satisfying.

Now, the problem is that sometimes things get really nice inside. There's a sense of ease and well-being, and we start getting complacent. The world isn't such a bad place after all. I remember a Dhamma teacher who talked about what she called the third-and-a-half noble truth: that maybe you couldn't end suffering, but at least you could manage it. It's okay. That's the attitude that keeps people coming back. So you really want to look inside.

Where are you pinning your hopes for happiness? [...coyotes howling in background...] Listen to those coyotes howling. They say the ones who howl

are the ones that are frustrated in their desires. At least we human beings have the opportunity to look at our desires and decide how much we want to follow them. We're not quite so driven, but we don't have to be driven at all. Many of us are very driven, but we have the option to step back, look at our greed, aversion, and delusion, to look at our pride, and ask ourselves: "Are these the things that are going to take us to happiness? Can we really trust them?"

This is why one of the Buddha's most basic teaching is on the topic of refuge. We have examples of people who have stepped back from their cravings and freed themselves from that slavery. The news of these people should shake us up. We may have doubts about how far they really put an end to suffering, how far they could go, or how far we could go, but at least we owe it to ourselves to ask the question: What would it be like not to have to follow our cravings? Here's a teaching that offers the possibility. It offers a path. This is what you do, the steps are all laid out. They offer a way out.

One of the biggest misrepresentations of the teaching is that it's pessimistic. But the idea that just coming back again and again and again would be enough, would be okay, so why not just put up with things the way that they are?—That's the pessimistic approach. Or the third-and-a-half noble truth approach, that suffering is manageable, that it's okay, that this is as good as it gets, so you might as well learn how to accept it: That's a pessimistic approach, too. As the Buddha said, the secret to his awakening was that he wouldn't rest content with skillful qualities if they hadn't taken him all the way.

So on the one hand, you accept the fact that this is where you are. You don't try to deny the situation, but you also accept the fact that it could be better. The Buddha gives you the example that there is a way out, and we should take his example as our refuge. That's our protection. It's easy to shove him away, to blank him out of our minds as if he never existed. Yet when we do that, who are we benefiting? We're not benefiting ourselves, we're not benefiting the ones around us. So you always want to keep him in mind.

That's the other meaning of sarana: On the one hand it means refuge, but on the other it means something you keep recollecting—you keep recollecting his example, that this is what human beings can do. Recollect the Dhamma: This is the guidance he offered so that we can find that

freedom. Recollect the Sangha, the noble Sangha, who showed that it wasn't just the Buddha who could do this. They applied his teaching to their lives, to their hearts, and found that they gained the same freedom.

You always want to keep that possibility of freedom in your mind as you make your choices. As you go through life, try to make the choices that go in that direction so that you can learn what it's like not to be pulled around by the nose by craving. Have at least a taste of what freedom would be like. It's only when you've had that first genuine taste that you can really trust yourself: that even though you'll be making mistakes and still may not be totally free from defilements, at least you know that there is a way out, and it's for sure.

There's no pessimism in the Buddha's teachings. He offers the possibility of a totally unfettered happiness. That's as good as it gets, and it's a lot better than the way things are right now.

Always keep that in mind.

Sober Up

January 30, 2011

In English, when we talk about getting the mind to stay focused on something, we talk about its "settling down." And in one way that's right. The mind tends to be flying around all over the place. If it can focus on one object, it's like a flock of birds that finally settle down on one spot, all gathered together.

In Thai, though, they have another idiom: They talk about lifting the mind up above its ordinary preoccupations.

So you can think of the mind either going up or down, whichever seems to describe how it feels to you as the mind settles in with the breath and you drop all your other concerns.

For the time being, you don't want to be interested in anything else—just interested in the breath. Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths, and see how it feels. If it feels good, keep it up. The question may arise: Where should it feel good? For instance, it may feel good in the rib cage, but not so good in the shoulders. As you breathe in, there may be a tightness in the head. Well, see if you can find a way of breathing that feels good all over. Relax all the muscles in the head, in the shoulders, down through the torso, and try to keep them relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out.

You're studying the process of breathing here. You see that if the breath feels good in the body, it's going to be good for the different organs of the body. After all, the breath is the energy that keeps everything going. Without it, the body would die. The organs would stop functioning. So it's one kind of food for the body. And as with any other kind of food, you can fix it well or fix it poorly. You can feed the body well or you can feed it poison. So let's feed it good food: breathing that feels good, a good energy that flows all throughout the body.

If you take an interest in the breath, it helps you put aside your interest in other things. This is where it's important to think of this as lifting the

mind up. Most of our other interests pull us down. We have our passions for sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations, and we think that these things are what give spice and interest to life. But they also tie us down. They get us intoxicated so that we don't see things clearly. We need something better: a pleasure that, instead of pulling us down, lifts us up, gives us some freedom, gives us some clarity of mind.

Even though there may be some desire in doing the practice, there may be some clinging to the comfortable sensations that come, that's a healthy desire, that's even a healthy clinging. There will come a point in the practice where you let it go, but you shouldn't let it go too quickly. Use it as you find it. It's helpful to keep you with the breath.

As for the distractions that come along, you have to remind yourself that they can get you drunk. The Buddha talks about different kinds of intoxication. There's intoxication with youth, intoxication with health, intoxication with life: Those are the three big ones. Then there's intoxication with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, all the things we crave. And, of course, when you're intoxicated by these things, you end up doing crazy things, stupid things, unskillful things. That's what ties us down.

We like to think of our pleasures as not having any price. But they do carry a big price. This is why the Buddha has us reflect every day: What do you have that's really yours? You can gain pleasures, and then they leave you. You're subject to aging, illness, and death, separation from all things you love, and so is everybody else. The Buddha has you reflect on that. It sounds depressing, but then there's the fifth reflection: We are the owners of our actions. This is something we do have, these are things we do carry with us: the results of past actions and habits that shape the actions we keep doing in the present moment. Those are our real possessions.

So when you think about a particular pleasure, think further: What are the actions that go into gaining the pleasure and holding on to the pleasure? What do you do when you lose the pleasure? The pleasures don't last. Ajaan Suwat used to like to ask, "Where are yesterday's sensual pleasures?" Can you pull them up and savor them again? All you have are memories, and we know about memories. They get distorted, and the memory of a past pleasure is not necessarily a pleasant thing. So these things simply don't last, and they can turn on you. All you've really got are the results of your actions.

The Buddha says that as you reflect on that, it helps you to abandon unskillful actions and to develop skillful ones in their place. Then he has you go on to reflect that it's not just you. Everybody, wherever you go, and wherever you could go, wherever you could be reborn, any level of the universe: Everybody is still subject to aging, illness, death, and separation, and they all have their actions. This, he says, is enough to motivate you to want to get out. Because it's so easy, under the influence of pleasure, to do unskillful things. You work hard to do what is skillful, there are pleasant things that come about as a result, and then you fall for the pleasant things. You forget about the fact that your old actions are what got you there, and that your new actions will shape where you're going.

These are important things to think about as you're trying to get the mind into the present moment. You realize that if you wander off, it's like getting drunk. Ajaan Lee talks about meditators as being like drunks, weaving back-and-forth across the road, and then falling over in a stupor. In other words, you don't really stay with your object of meditation. You're still thinking about the things you like to do, things you'd like to experience, things you'd like to see, hear, taste, touch, and smell. That's got you weaving down the path already. Then you leave the meditation object entirely. That's like falling over in a stupor on the side of the road.

Ajaan Fuang once said to notice the pleasures that you really would like to experience, things that the mind tends to feed on. He says the fact that you're so obsessed with them is a sign that you had them in the past—and you miss them now. Just think about that for a few seconds. It's enough to make you want to get out of the whole process. Because, after all, if you had them once in the past, you probably had them before that, and you had them before that, and you kept missing them after you lost them. You get them again and you lose them again. It doesn't accomplish anything at all. Whereas the path here can lift your mind up to a higher level. The pleasure that comes with just being with the breath, the Buddha said, is a higher level of pleasure. It's also a level of pleasure that clarifies the mind. When the mind is steadily in the present moment, that's when discernment can arise.

The pleasure of the breath as you work with it is not just an inducement to help you stay with the breath. It's an important part of taking you further on the path. It gives you something to feed on while you're following the path, so that you don't go hungering after food that would be off the path.

You don't get poisoned. It's interesting that the word for "intoxicated" in Thai —mao—can also mean that you're poisoned by something. The pleasures that we go for in the course of the day are like poison. They have a really bad effect on the mind because they make you do unskillful things. That's why the Buddha gives you good food for the path here so that you don't go searching for poison off in the brush.

So try to take an interest in the breath. Notice how it feels in the different parts of the body. If any parts of the body tend to be in pain, you might want to think of the breath energy soothing those parts, comforting those parts. The areas in the body where things seem to be blocked off: Think of the blockage opening up. Sometimes you'll notice, as you begin to make a survey of the different parts of the body, that certain parts seem to be missing. You may feel like you don't have a shoulder. If you open your eyes and look, of course it's there, but feeling from the inside, it seems that it's not there. In that case, try to locate where you feel your hand—again, from the inside. And how about the torso? Then work your way up from the hand, and up from the torso, and see where things connect. Give the breath new places to flow so that it's soothing both for the body and for the mind, healing both for the body and for the mind. Because when you see that it's good for both your body and mind, you're more likely to get interested in it. You're not so attracted to other things right now. You've got this new skill to master, this new area to explore.

Don't let those old poisoned mushrooms attract you. Learn to see your distractions just as that: "This is poison, it's going to intoxicate you, it might kill you, kill your goodness." At the very least, it gets you all bleary headed and you come out of the meditation not having profited at all. And not just with the meditation: As you go through life, you have to watch out for these attractive things that pull you in. Like poisonous mushrooms: They're the prettiest mushrooms around, but that doesn't mean they're good for you.

Try to clear your head here with some good breathing and sober up. As you learn how to use the breath to help the different organs of the body, you also give the mind a good place to stay in the present moment, where it can see things clearly, see its intentions and the results of its intentions clearly.

That's the beginning of real discernment right there. We tend to think of Buddhist wisdom as dealing with very abstruse abstractions, but it really starts with this insight into "What are you doing?" "What are the results?"

All the teachings on emptiness, not-self, universal compassion: They all come down to this question: What kind of action is this? Is it a good action? If not, what can you do to replace it with a better one?

How do you know if it's a good action? You look at the results. Some actions fill the mind with confusion; other actions empty the mind of its confusions. Some habits are worth holding on to; some habits are not. This is how the teaching on action gradually develops into teachings on emptiness, not-self, and all the other more advanced teachings. But they start right here and they never really leave this principle: What are you doing? What are the results? And how can you see that clearly? What states of mind can you develop? What states of mind do you have to let go of so that you can really understand all the implications of your actions?

The breath is where you start.

In the Mood

October 20, 2011

When you meditate, you've got to put the mind in the right mood. Sometimes, focusing on the breath is the way to put it in the right mood. You take a couple of long, deep, in-and-out breaths, and it feels good. You can just feel the stress and the strain melting away. The patterns of tension you've been holding in your body begin to dissolve. There's a sense of nourishment that comes from that. So you just drink it in. If, after a while, long breathing doesn't feel good, you can try other rhythms: short in, long out; long in, short out; or shorter breathing, more shallow, lighter, heavier. You get to explore this area of what they call form: the way you feel the body from within. Sometimes that's enough to get the mind to settle down.

Other times, you need to think about other things first in order to get into the right mood to stay with the breath. The Buddha talks about gladdening the mind, steadying the mind, and releasing the mind. These are ways of taking a mind that's a little bit out of balance and bringing it back into balance. They're for taking a mind that doesn't feel like meditating, that refuses to stay with the breath, and get it so that it's more willing, so that it finally decides that, Yes, it really does want to stay with the breath.

After all, this element of desire is an important part of the meditation. It's an important part of the practice, an essential element in right effort. It's not the case that the Buddha described all desire as bad. The desire to develop the right factors of the path and to abandon the wrong factors: That's actually part of the path itself. So a good way to get the mind willing and happy to settle down with the breath is to look at the mind and see what it needs.

Sometimes it needs gladdening. In other words, you have to raise your energy level. Look at the positive side of meditating. This is one of the reasons why we have those chants on goodwill before we meditate. You realize that when you meditate, you really are showing goodwill to yourself, and at the same time you're showing goodwill to others. You're looking for a form of happiness that doesn't take anything away from anyone else.

At the same time, you're looking for a form of happiness that you can depend on, because it doesn't have to depend on anyone else. It comes from your own inner resources. And that form of happiness is a special sense of security. It's like knowing you have plenty of food stored away, plenty of water, all the things you need. That's a lot better than having to depend on people outside, or things outside being a certain way.

Because when we look at the world, we can see that it very rarely stays a certain way. Sometimes there's too much rain, sometimes not enough rain, sometimes there are huge fires and earthquakes. Right now there are floods in Thailand. We're sitting up here on the mountain, thinking, "Well, at least we're not going to get flooded." But we do have fires here, we do have earthquakes. No matter where you look in the world, there's always natural danger.

Then, of course, there are the dangers that come from a mind that hasn't been trained. As we're working on training the mind here, we're finding a source of happiness that doesn't have to be touched by things outside. It doesn't have to depend on things outside. We're a lot more secure. As you develop this happiness, it's not a selfish thing. You find that you have more to share with others. You have more strength to give.

These are some ways of gladdening the mind so that you see the positive side of the meditation.

Then there's the process of steadying the mind. That has more to do with seeing the negative results of not meditating. In other words, you realize that if you let the mind wander outside, you're wandering in dangerous territory. The Buddha gives the image of a monkey going into an area where the human beings are, and it turns out that the human beings have set out traps for the monkeys. They put out little patches of tar, the monkey gets stuck on the tar, and it can't get away. There's also the story of the quail that wanders away from its normal territory, which is a field where clods of earth and stones have been plowed up, where it can hide from hawks. Well, it wanders away to an area that hasn't been plowed and, sure enough, a hawk swoops down and gets it.

So those are the dangers of not staying with your frame of reference, which right now is the body in and of itself, the breath coming in, going out. You think of all the trouble you can get yourself into if you don't train your mind.

For instance, think about the pleasures you'd like to enjoy. Ajaan Fuang once commented that the pleasures you're really going for, especially the sensual pleasures, the ones that really have a strong impact on you: Why do they have that impact? It's because you had them in the past, and you want them back. In other words, whether it was in this lifetime or another lifetime, there's something inside you that really gets drawn to things you used to have. But, of course, what does that mean? That you're going to lose them again, and you're going to hunger for them again. It goes around and around and around. And you know the kind of stupid, and crazy, and harmful things you can do sometimes under the influence of that kind of desire. This kind of thinking is chastening.

Like the chant that we had just now: The world is swept away, it does not endure, it offers no shelter, there's no one in charge, the world has nothing of its own, one has to pass on leaving everything behind, it's insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving. It's full of inconstancy, stress, pain, not-self, yet craving keeps driving you back to these things again and again and again. There's never a sense of enough.

There's that story of the king in the Canon who was curious: What does it mean, the world is a slave to craving? The monk who's teaching him says, "Suppose someone came from the east and said, 'There's a kingdom to the east full of all kinds of treasures, all kinds of wealth. It's prosperous but it's army is weak, and you could conquer it if you wanted to.' Would you conquer it?" Here the king, who was 80 years old already, said, "Sure. I'd try to conquer it, rule it."

"Then suppose another man came from the south, saying that there's another kingdom like that to the south. And as it turns out, there's another man from the west, and one from the north, all saying the same thing. Would you try to conquer those kingdoms as well?" "Of course." "Suppose someone were to come from the other side of the ocean saying, "There's a kingdom on other side of the ocean you could conquer." And the king said he'd go for that one, too. In other words, the mind has no sense of enough when it comes to sensual pleasures, when it comes to power, because there never really is enough. None of that stuff is secure.

There's another story of a former king who had become a monk and would go sit under a tree, exclaiming, "What bliss! What bliss!" The other monks were concerned that he was missing his pleasures as a king. So they

go and inform the Buddha, and the Buddha asks for the monk to come and see him. The Buddha asks him, "What do you have in mind when you're saying this?" The monk says, "Back when I was a king, even though I had guards posted inside and outside the palace, inside and outside the city, inside and outside the countryside, still at night I couldn't sleep for fear that someone would come and take my life, take my power away. But now I can sit under a tree, my needs met, and I have no fear of any danger from any direction at all." In other words, the happiness of power and wealth has no safety at all. So when your mind is prowling around in those kinds of thoughts, you have to realize you're in unsafe territory.

That kind of thought is chastening. It gives rise to what the Buddha calls saṁvega, which literally means terror. But it also can mean a sense of dismay over how futile those kinds of pleasures are—how that kind of thinking that goes after those pleasures is just going to get you into a lot of trouble. That realization helps to steady the mind.

So you realize there's nowhere else you want to go, you want to stay right here. Ajaan Maha Boowa compares these teachings to a stick you use to train a monkey. As soon as the monkey reaches for something, you hit it with a stick. In the same way, you hit the mind with these teachings so that as soon as it wanders away from the breath, bang! you realize you're looking for trouble, and you come right back.

In this way, you look at the positive side of how good it is to meditate and you look at the negative side of how bad your life can get if you don't meditate. They've done studies of people who develop skills, and they've discovered that the ones that are really proficient at particular skills are the ones who, on the one hand, really take to heart the benefits of developing that skill, and on the other, are very alert to the dangers of not developing it, the harm you could do.

Years back, we were sitting on a plane, and two knee surgeons were sitting in the seats in front of us. They had just come from a conference. There was an older surgeon and a younger one. The younger one had just recently graduated from school, and his attitude was, "Well, I've learned all I really need in order to take care of me for the rest of my life. I really don't need to learn much more." The older one said, "No, you can't think like that at all. There are always advances, and there are so many things you can do wrong to people's knees if you don't really take care and do your best." The

younger one didn't seem to be receptive. I kept thinking: "Keep me away from that surgeon." People who don't realize the harm they can do to themselves and to other people are really dangerous.

So these are ways that you gladden the mind, realizing that the meditation really does provide a way out, and it's a good way out, too. It's not filled with thorns and brambles. It's a good path; you get to sit here and focus on your breath, to work with the breath energy in the body so that it nourishes the body along with the mind, so that the mind has a greater sense of well-being. Even as you're on the way, even though you haven't reached the end yet, you can still develop a very strong sense of well-being just being on the path.

Then you steady the mind by realizing that if you wander off the path, even a little bit, the hawk can come and get you. These cravings of yours that wander away can keep you going without end.

When you can develop both of these attitudes, you find that it's a lot easier to stay with the breath. And the more consistently you can stay with the breath, being observant about what you're doing, then the more momentum you build up in the path. It's not just a series of starts and stops, starts and stops. It becomes more continuous. It flows. So try to keep these right attitudes in mind.

Today Is Better than Yesterday

August 15, 2011

At Wat Dhammasathit there would be traveling salesmen who would come driving past in the afternoon. Sometimes they'd be selling big water jars, sometimes salt. The most memorable was the one who would come in fairly regularly selling Chinese dumplings. He would get on his loudspeaker as he was driving down the road and announce, "Today's dumplings are better than yesterday's." The next day he'd come back: "Today's dumplings are better than yesterday's." He kept this up day after day. You began to wonder when he was going to reach the platonic ideal of dumplings. But someone pointed out to me one time, "Well, where are yesterday's dumplings right now? If they're not down in your intestines, they're probably down in your cesspool. So, yes, today's dumplings are better than yesterday's."

That's a good attitude to have toward your meditation as well: Today's meditation is better than yesterday's. Yesterday's is gone. Even though it may seem like you had some great meditations in the past, and your current meditation couldn't compare, this is the meditation you're working with. Even if the past ones really were all that good, they've left you high and dry. So maybe they weren't so good after all.

So how do you deal with that when it seems that the mind is not settling down the way it used to, or the breath isn't as comfortable. On the one hand, you have to forget yesterday's meditation. On the other hand, though, you have to remember. In other words, the forgetting relates to the fact that you're not trying to look at yesterday's breath, you're trying to look at today's breath. Your memories of yesterday's breath and yesterday's meditation are going to get in the way of seeing what's actually happening with the breath right here, right now. In that way, you have to forget, wipe the slate clean. Try to come to the meditation with the same attitude of exploration that you had when you first started meditating. Your problems right now may be the "old hat" problem. Everything seems to be kind of old, and you're not expecting too much anymore, so you don't feel all that encouraged to put in much effort or to pay a lot of attention.

That cynical attitude is one you've got to put aside. You've got this breath right here, right now: How can you make the most of it? And remember where that cynical attitude came from. It came from the fact that yesterday's meditation was really good, or that maybe last year's meditation was really good, and in the meantime, things have not been so good. So you get cynical about the whole process, believing that no matter how good things may get, you're going to fall back to your old ways, the way you were before. That saps your strength.

As for the part to remember: Try to remember what worked in the past and give it a try. What kind of breathing was most centering? Where were you focused that seemed to get the best results? If nothing seems to work, remember the lessons you learned about how to explore: i.e., just to sit and not do anything for a little while, but with a questioning attitude. Just watch what the breath is going to do, and see if you can catch something new that you didn't see before.

In particular, learn the lesson of patience. The most fatal error you can make as a meditator is to be impatient. You want the results really fast. You do a little bit of the causes and then you say, "Okay, where are the results? I want the payback right now." That impatience is what does you in. You have to just stick with the breath, stick with it, stick with it, and don't let the cynical and lazy members of the committee take over.

Because this is another thing you've got to keep in mind, which is that the mind is like a committee. Although it may have been that a few of the members were meditating really well sometime in the past, a lot of the other members were not involved. Or they were withholding judgment for the time being and then they decided they didn't like it, so they started ganging up on the members that want to meditate. You've got to learn how to deal with them.

This is where the Buddha's teachings on the five strengths are useful, because your cynical members, your lazy members, your forgetful members, your scatterbrained members, and your dumb members are the ones who are getting in the way.

In other words, the cynical members say, "This isn't going to work, it's not worth all the effort, don't bother."

The discussion then moves over to your lazy members, the ones who want pleasure right away without having to put in much effort.

Then there are the forgetful members, the ones who say, "Well, you can gain happiness in really quick, easy ways," but they forget what the long-term consequences of some of those quick, easy ways were.

That goes to your scatterbrained members, ones that don't really follow through with anything.

And then finally the dumb members: They're not just dumb, they engage in a lot of denial. When you think about ignorance in the mind, it's not simply that you don't know. It's that there are parts of the mind that just don't want to admit the truth, so they find reasons for covering things up.

To fight these members, you need to conviction. That deals with the cynical members, telling them that, yes, the effort you put into the practice really does make a difference. Maybe the results aren't there right away, but the conviction is what carries you through, reminding you that some things really do take time if they're going to be good. It also reminds you that if you don't follow this path, even though this path may seem long, the path of not practicing is a lot longer and involves a lot more suffering. Actually, you can't think of that as a path, it's more like a slide downhill. So instead of asking, "How much longer is it going to be before I'm through with these defilements?" the question should be: "How much longer do I want to suffer? How much longer do I want to keep on suffering, to keep crying those tears that have already exceeded the ocean?" Conviction is what reminds you that this is the way out, and you've got to follow that way if it's going to get done.

Then you develop persistence, the quality of sticking with it, sticking with it. Regardless of whether the results are coming fast or slow, you just stick with it. When the lazy dilettantes in your mind complain—and they'll have lots of very sophisticated reasons—you just refuse to give in.

Then you remember. As I said, there are some things you should want to forget and some things you should want to remember if you're on the path. You try to remember the lessons you learned from the past and then see if they apply right now.

To see if they really apply requires your concentration. You stay focused right here, right here, right here, as continuously as you can. If your gaze is not continuous, there are going to be little gaps, and lots of important things can happen in those gaps. You want to be with the breath all the way in, with the breath all the way out. When the mind wanders off, you want to

bring it right back. Try to see through the gaps. Connect your moments of awareness, your moments of attention so that there's a continuous line.

This is why mindfulness and concentration have to go together. Mindfulness is what keeps reminding you to keep coming back, coming back. Concentration is the quality of solidity that comes when your mindfulness is good. In that way, you can start piercing through all the curtains of denial that the mind puts up, to see how it's been causing itself suffering, and how it doesn't have to. You see where your real burdens are, and you work with those. The things that are not really your burdens, not really your responsibilities, you're willing to put those aside. That's the strength of discernment.

One of the images in the Canon for discernment is of a fortress wall covered with plaster. In other words, it's smooth. Your defilements have no foothold to make inroads into the mind. The only way you can make your mind smooth like that is to be as continually aware as possible, and to be especially leery of any sweet-talking defilements, the ones who want to put a nice haze over things so that you really can't see what they're doing.

These are the five strengths you need to stay focused right here, right now, and to develop that quality of patience. Impatience is what leads people to addiction. Impatience is what keeps people back. They just want a quick fix right now, right now, and when they come to meditation they want the results right now, right now. When they don't get the results, they go off someplace else. That's one of the big obstacles you've got to overcome.

To fight that impatience, you need a combination of your conviction that, yes, this is worth it; and your persistence, your willingness to stick right with it; and your mindfulness and concentration working together so that you can stay focused and use that focus to pierce through things, like a magnifying glass that focuses all the rays of the sun in one spot: You can set fire to little things that you couldn't have set fire to otherwise. You can burn a hole right through a piece of paper. In the same way, your mindfulness and concentration working together enable your discernment to pierce through all the flimsy arguments that greed, aversion, and delusion will churn out.

It's in this way that, regardless of how good yesterday's meditation was, today's meditation is going to be better. Not only because it's today's meditation, the one that you can actually work on, but also because there is progress. You are learning. Whether things are going well or not, those are

the raw materials you've got to work with. But it's in the learning: That's where the progress in the meditation comes. You need your mindfulness to remember those lessons so that you can keep applying them and refining them as you go through this practice day by day.

The thing about this practice is that it does have a final point, unlike the other path that's not going to end unless you decide you've had enough. So keep your focus right here, right now, and try to strengthen the good committee members so that the unskillful ones don't eat up your meditation. You're working on something solid here, something really important. Always keep that fact in mind.

Get Out of the Way

December 7, 2010

The mind has its ups and downs, and we have to learn how not to get upset by the downs or complacent about the ups. This is where patience and equanimity, combined with conviction, are important elements in the path. On days when you're down, when the mind is just not cooperating, realize that it's a normal part of the process. The mind is a very complicated thing to train. There's a passage in the Canon where an elephant trainer is talking to the Buddha. He says, "Elephants are a lot easier to understand than human beings." He notes that within the course of a few days he can get to know an elephant, and he knows all the tricks that that elephant has up its sleeves—if an elephant were to have sleeves. As for human beings, though, human beings are a mystery.

All kinds of things go on in the mind. You have to accept it as normal that the mind is not going to always respond the way you want it to. Something is going on that you may not know about, or may be hidden from you, and you all you can get little glimpses here and there, like the micro-expressions that flit across people's faces. So the best attitude to take at times like that is to remind yourself: We're here to learn, and sometimes the lesson we're learning is that this is what the mind is like when it's not cooperative.

But you don't just stop with patience. You're patient so that you can observe. You want to watch, watch, watch: What's the mind doing? Sometimes it'll give you little clues. If you give up and say, "Well, today is a bad day to meditate," or "Right now is a bad time to meditate," and stop meditating, you'll never see what's actually going on. Actually, the mind is displaying all kinds of stuff for you to see. It's simply a question of whether you're looking at the right spot, or if your powers of perception are subtle enough.

Focus on what strengths you do have. All too often when things are difficult, we let the difficulties get us down. We pile more difficulties on top of ourselves. So make a survey of what is going well. At least you're sitting

here, you're not harming anybody, and you're not allowing yourself to be totally overwhelmed by whatever is going through the mind.

This is also a good time to learn a little bit about not-self. In other words, whatever comes up in the mind, you don't have to identify with it. Sometimes we're very responsible. With every little thought that comes up in the mind, we feel we have to look at it, examine it, file it away, pass judgment on it as to whether it's useful or not. For the time being, though, you don't have to be responsible for any of these thoughts. You have one thought you want to hold on to. You want to stay alert in the present moment. If you can stay with the breath, try to notice where the breath is in the midst of all this, and just hang on. As for anything else that comes by, learn how to get out of the way.

Ajaan Fuang and had a student who had had cancer, and after one of her operations they gave her radiation treatment. She discovered that she was allergic to the anesthetic, so the doctors were stymied. She said, "Well, can you do it without the anesthetic?" They said, "The pain is intense." She told them, "I'm a meditator." So they tried it, and she was able to get through it. But she later said that she was exhausted at the end of the treatment because she had been using her powers of concentration just to focus, focus, focus, and not allow herself to have any reaction to the pain. Afterwards, Ajaan Fuang went to visit her and asked her how it went. She explained, and he told her, "You can't use just your concentration. You also have to use your discernment."

One way of doing that is to see that the pain is inconstant. Even though there's a steady stream of little pain packets, each little pain packet does go away, go away before it's replaced by another one. Another way to use your discernment is just to get out of the way. Don't have a "you" in there that's experiencing the pain, that has to get involved with the pain, that has to be responsible for the pain. The woman later told me that the next time she underwent the treatment, it went a lot more easily. It didn't require so much physical and mental energy.

The insight there was a way of making things, you might say, more efficient, not expending so much energy just fighting things off. You learn how to get out of the way. When thoughts come in to disturb you, just get out of the way. Think of yourself as a large window screen, the thoughts are like a breeze coming through the screen, and the screen doesn't catch the

breeze. It's right there in the midst of the breeze but it doesn't take responsibility for the breeze, doesn't have to get involved with the breeze at all. It's just right here, right here, right here. That way, the breeze doesn't disturb the screen. Now, you may rather not have that breeze of thoughts coming through your mind, but just being the screen puts you in a good position. You're a lot less involved in having to take care of it because if you don't get involved with the thoughts, they have to pass through and away on their own. The mind stays as it is.

This is a useful image to keep in mind when you're meditating in an area where there's a lot of noise. I learned it one time in Bangkok. I was staying in a monastery there and didn't realize that right outside my window was a little store that opened up at 4 a.m. They served rice porridge to the little tuk-tuk drivers and had a big boombox. In the evening, they had the boombox on, and then again in the morning, to let the tuk-tuk drivers know they were open for business. I found I could actually meditate in the midst of the noise if I just got out of the way. In other words, the thoughts about the noise—let them go; the noise—just let it go; whatever had anything to do with the noise—just let it go, let it go right through. That made things made it a lot easier. I didn't have to expend so much energy and fighting off the noise.

Another time we were camping in Arches National Park. It was November and we thought we had the campground to ourselves, but then somebody showed up late at night, and they, too, had a boombox. Again, I was just a screen for the sound to go through.

You can apply the same approach to your thoughts. They're going to arise, and you can just stay there as a screen, letting them go through, go through. After a while, when you learn how to step out of the way, you can begin to watch them. You begin to see where in the body a particular thought tends to gather up tension. The little knots of tension that correspond to the thought: This is how a thought takes hold. If you can sense where in the body it's happening, you can just breathe right through it, make your screen a screen of all the different breath channels in the body, and make sure there are no knots in the screen. As soon as you see a little knot forming, just breathe right through it. Open up the flow. That's all you have to do.

An important skill in the practice is learning how to do things more efficiently, to figure out where you're expending unnecessary energy. Then the meditation gets a lot easier.

This is what practice is all about. If you've ever learned how to play a musical instrument, you realize that this is a lot of what practice is in that skill as well. You do the same scales over and over and over again, and after a while you begin to realize that you're doing them in a clumsy fashion. There's a more efficient way of doing them, a smoother way of doing them. So it's not just the amount of time you put in it, but it's also the way you use your powers of observation to look for where there's unnecessary energy being expended, where you're taking on too many battles or trying to manage too many things all at once. What things do you not have to be responsible for? Things that you can just let go and they'll go away on their own.

As with the breath: Sometimes we feel we have to push and push and push the breath to get it to go through the body, but that's not breath you're pushing, you're pushing the blood. The flow of the breath energy through the body doesn't involve any pushing at all. It's just a matter of relax, relax, relax, allow, allow, allow, as the breath comes in and the breath goes out. Try to catch and disperse areas in the body where you're tensing up even the least little bit around the breath.

The important principle here is that you learn how to be observant and to ask the right questions. Sometimes being observant means observing the mind when it's not in good shape, when it's got a lot of things bubbling up—like Whack-A-Mole, with all of those little moles coming out of the holes. You can tell yourself: "Why do I have to play Whack-A-Mole?" Just walk away from the game. Stay with the breath channels of the body; stay with whatever you find is a good vantage point. After a while, things will begin to calm down on their own, and you don't have to whack any of the moles at all.

Now, part of the mind may say, "This is being very irresponsible." But meditation, like any battle, is a matter of learning how to choose your battles. What are the important battles to fight? Part of being a responsible warrior is realizing that some battles don't have to be fought. They're just a waste of energy. In that way, you can concentrate on the ones that really do matter. So keep watching.

Antidotes

December 13, 2010

It's a common complaint you hear among meditators: the question, "I've been meditating all this time, and I still have a problem with anger," or "I still have a problem with the lust"—or fear, or greed, or jealousy, whatever the unskillful emotion may be. The expectation seems to be that sitting and meditating is going to take care of everything else.

You have to remember that the concentration, the mindfulness, the alertness you develop as a meditator: All of these things are tools. If you don't actually use the tool, you're not going to get any results. You can put the tool on the cushion or in a nice little display box, but unless you take it off of the cushion or out of the display box and put it to use, it's as if you didn't have the tool at all.

So you can't expect that x number of hours of sitting here with your eyes closed—very concentrated, very mindful—will automatically make a difference in how you deal with emotions as they arise in the course of the day. You have to develop your discernment by learning how to use the concentration and the mindfulness and the alertness.

Discernment is not automatic. It's not the case that once the mind gets very clear, all these wonderful insights will suddenly come springing up that you can trust 100%. After all, some of the worst delusions that meditators suffer from come from a concentrated mind. Ajaan Fuang had a number of students who became quite psychic through their meditation. In some cases, the more psychic they were, the more they were impressed by how accurate their intuitions were. But then when mistaken intuitions came up, they wouldn't recognize them. They wouldn't admit they were wrong. Major delusion.

He had one student in particular, I remember, who had extremely strong powers of concentration. She would come to him and complain that she still had anger and other emotional problems. Why wasn't the concentration taking care of them? It was because concentration on its own is not enough to dig these things out. It just gets the mind calm enough so that you can

see—if you're willing to see. And it gives you a foundation that you can use to take things apart, to analyze things, to understand why it is that the mind gets overturned by these things—if you want to understand.

You can use this foundation on many levels. One typical level is that if you're going into a situation that you know is going to create difficulties, you have to prepare yourself. Say you're going home for the holidays: You know what the family can be like. Well, it's good to sit down and plan: So-and-so tends to say this, or so-and-so tends to push these buttons, and in the past you've reacted. How can you think about the situation, and how can you prepare for the situation so that you don't react in those unskillful ways?

This comes under the aspect of right effort that's called preventing unskillful qualities from arising—i.e., you know they have a tendency to arise, so sit down and think about them. This is a legitimate use of the end of your meditation. If you've been sitting for an hour, give yourself some extra time at the end of the hour to think about these things and plan. Run some scenarios through your mind. In other words, you have to get to know what are your trigger points, and how you've responded unskillfully to those trigger points in the past. Try running a few alternatives through the mind, and see how the mind responds.

Sometimes it'll go with the alternative, and other times it'll come up with a complaint or an objection. You have to ask yourself: "Is the objection legitimate?" Because one of the most important things about being a good meditator is to learn how to be a little bit skeptical about what the mind is telling you. In other words, you test your proposal, and then you test the objections. It's not that you immediately go with one or with the other.

That's one of the reasons why we train the mind to be with the breath—so that it can sit there and not take sides prematurely. Just as when you sit here and a thought comes into the mind you learn not to run with it, you've got to learn to use this skill in other areas, other parts of your life, where things are more rushed, where there's a lot more going on. If you forget the skills you've developed here, you're going to get into trouble. So spend a little time running these things through your mind, getting prepared.

The same principle applies to more subtle affairs in the mind as well. Last night someone noted, "There are these schools of Buddhist thought that say you have to learn to perceive the world in certain terms before you can truly be awakened. You have to have a perception of how empty everything

is, you have to understand emptiness, or you have to have an understanding of not-self. Or to learn how to see things in terms of ultimate realities. Then, once you get the correct perception, that's going to take care of everything."

Fortunately, the Buddha wasn't as one-eyed as that. He realized that the human mind has many ways of feeding. It's like that story in the Canon where the daughters of Mara come to test the Buddha. They say among themselves, "Men have many different tastes in women. Let's try all different kinds to see what will attract him." They run through lots of different guises, but they're unable to catch the Buddha with any of them. And that's just lust. The mind feeds on anger in many different ways, too. The mind feeds on fear, it feeds on worry in many different ways, and you've got to learn your feeding habits. Why do you react in certain ways? What is it about that reaction that you enjoy?

The Buddha gives an example for when you're analyzing your attachment to concentration. This is a fairly advanced stage, but the principle applies all across the board. You look at the state of concentration and learn how to see it as aggregates. Then look at the aggregates as inconstant, stressful, not-self, a cancer, a dart, a dissolution, a void—all kinds of different ways of driving home the point that these are not things you want to stay attached to. Some people will respond to the inconstancy. Some people respond more to the not-selfishness. Some people respond more to the idea that the aggregates are a wound or a disease.

There's another place where he says you should learn to see the aggregates as murderous. They're chewing you up. There's a memorable story of a man wanting to kill a king. He gets into the king's service and becomes a reliable servant of the king. Then one day, when he finally catches the king one-on-one, he kills him. As the Buddha said, the man was actually the king's murderer even before he got into the king's service. Every day when he was getting up before the king and going back to sleep after the king and doing everything the king told him, the man was still the king's murderer, because that was his plan.

The Buddha then said it's the same with the aggregates. Right now you can use them: Your body is very helpful. When you want to get up, it'll get up; when you want to eat, it'll eat; if you want to do work of different kinds, it'll do it for you. But it won't always do that. Someday these aggregates will turn on you. They're already your murderers.

There's a phrase in Thai, taai-jai, which means that you trust something so much that all your skepticism dies. That's the way we are with many things in life, and the Buddha has to remind you to remind yourself these things are not totally dependable.

So there are many possible angles by which you may suddenly decide that these things that you've been feeding on are not worth it after all and you lose your taste for them. You know that concentration is there to give you something better to feed on, but this is not always obvious to the mind. Most of us say: "Well, we can do the concentration and the mindfulness at one time, and then we can have our other pleasures at another time. What's the problem with that?" The problem is that those other pleasures are going to turn on you sometime. And where are you going to go then? If your concentration hasn't been fully developed, you're going to be lost. So you have to reflect on the advantages of the pleasure of concentration, the advantages of the sense of stability and clarity that come with the concentration.

When you're dealing with lust or anger or fear, learn how to observe the whole process: the object, say, of the lust, and also the actual sensation of the lust in the mind: what it's doing to you; the object of the anger, and what the anger is doing to you. Try to look for where you get your pleasure out of these things and why you enjoy feeding on the pleasure. Then try to develop whatever perceptions are necessary to help remind you that, okay, this may seem reliable but it's not really reliable. It may seem pleasant but it's not really pleasant. It may seem something that you have under your control but it could go totally out your control. It may seem healthy but it's a disease.

That's one of the mind's big arguments: that the real disease lies in not giving in to lust or anger. "This is just the way a healthy mind has to function," it says. "If it's not allowed to give into its passions, it's going to get all messed up." Like those monks and nuns in that old Ken Russell film, The Devils. The nuns were going around with their heads at a 90° angle, they were so distorted by their lack of sex. You walk into the movie and you realize: "Oh, this is what that movie is going to be about. The heads are not going to stand straight up until they've had sex." I walked out of the movie and said: "I don't need to see a movie about that." But there is that aspect in our society that says if you don't give in to your passions, you're going to get all distorted and crooked. You have to say: "Well, wait a minute. Killing,

cheating, stealing, anger: These are the things that are crooked in the mind. These are diseases, these are wounds in the mind." So in every case, you have to develop a perception that's an antidote focused right in on the area where you like to feed on a particular emotion, a particular way of behaving, to show you that it's not what you thought it was, that it's not worth it.

Sometimes you hear it said that we latch on to things because we have a sense that they have a permanent essence, that there's some inherent existence in that thing. Well, that's one reason why we latch on to some things: We think that it's permanent enough, that it's going to be lasting enough, it's going to be worth whatever effort is needed to put into it because it'll last long enough. But that's only one reason why we are attached to things. The ultimate underlying principal all across the board is that we think that whatever pleasure we get out of something is going to be worth the effort that we put into it. Some things we know are not going to last forever, but still we say: "It's going to last long enough for me, and I'm going to get enough pleasure out of it."

You have to learn how to analyze your tastes in things to see why you're attracted to something, and then use whatever perceptions the Buddha applies, or whatever perceptions you can think up on your own, that will counteract your initial perception and show that you weren't really getting out of it what you thought you were. The satisfaction you were going to derive from this is going to turn on you at some point, and you'll end up worse than you would have been otherwise. Whether you're focusing on the not-selfness, or the pain, or the wounded side, or the diseased side, or the emptiness side, or whatever that's an effective antidote for your particular attachment: Those are the perceptions you have to develop. You learn how to read your defilements—and the more clearly you understand them, the more effectively you'll be able to counteract them.

The concentration and alertness and mindfulness are here to help you with that project. But you have to put them specifically to use to get their full benefits.

Sorting Yourselves Out

November 11, 2010

When the Buddha talks about our sense of who we are, he talks about it in the context of kamma, because we make a sense of who we are. He calls it "I-making" and "my-making." And there's not just one "I," or one "my." For each desire, you have a sense of self, especially the desires you've acted on. There's the self that wants to experience pleasure as a result of the desire, there's the self that wants to find the powers, or to develop the powers, to bring that desire about, and then there's the author of the desire itself. So even with one desire, you have a cluster of three selves right there. Multiply that by all the different desires you've had, and you realize you've got a whole herd in here.

That's why, when you're sitting down to meditate, it's not just you. It's all of the "you's" in there. Some of them want to meditate; others would prefer to do other things. When you're sitting here, there's an enormous question about where your allegiance is right now, because sometimes they're split. Part of you wants to sit and get the mind still and quiet, other parts want to do other things. They have all kinds of agendas and all kinds of reasons. You have to a little wary, because some of them may seem like friends but they're not actually your friends. Some may be taking on the voice of authority, saying, "You have to do this, you have to worry about that, you have to plan for this, you're irresponsible if you don't do that." You have to sort things out. Exactly where do those responsibilities lie? Others among your selves don't have any real reasons. They just come on with a lot of force and bully you. It's just like politics.

An important part of the meditation is to remind yourself of why you're here. What kind of happiness have you seen in the world, what kind of happiness have you gained from following your greed, your lust, your aversion, your fears? Then weigh those pleasures against the pain you've felt by following those things. Ask yourself: "Have you learned your lessons?"

If one of these unskillful internal selves is coming on really strong, you need some tools for at least fending it off. For the time being you want some space here inside so that you really can settle down and the members of the committee that do want to settle down will have a chance to get a sense of ease and well-being with the breath. Which means you can't just grab on to the breath and force it. You want to simply allow it to be comfortable, to flow in different parts of the body, have a sense of the energy flowing all around without any obstacles, so that the parts of the mind that want to settle down will have some allies, and the part of the mind that wants immediate gratification, immediate pleasure, will be able to find it. That way, when greed, aversion, and delusion do come up, your allegiances are more on the side of the quiet, the stillness, the concentration, the mindfulness.

The Buddha does give you lots of tools to deal with these seeming friends inside, but the important factor always is that you try to identify with the parts of the mind that really do want the tools to work. Because it's very easy, if your allegiances are someplace else, to say, "Well, I've gone through the tools, and they don't work. I guess I'll just have to go along with the lust or the aversion." But you didn't really give the tools a proper chance.

For example, one of the chants we have, the 32 parts of the body, is a really good tool for dealing with lust, but people have lots of ways to resist that particular meditation. But it's very simple: Just think about it—what is the body made of? Hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, down to the bones, down to the different internal organs, and all the different liquids in the body: the blood, the lymph, the urine, the oils, the saliva: things we don't talk about in polite company, and certainly not the things you want to think about when you're beginning to align yourself with the lust. That's exactly why you want to think about these things. It helps cut you short, or helps cut that particular member of the committee short. If you're lusting for somebody, you can ask, "Are you lusting for their liver, are you lusting for their large intestine, or small intestine, or stomach, or the contents of the stomach?" No, but these things lie just a few micro-millimeters under the skin. So it's a good contemplation. But the point is that you have to find which members of the committee want to use it and then you strengthen them. You reaffirm your allegiance and the tools have a lot more likelihood of working.

The same with aversion: Suppose there's somebody you really don't like. If you act on that strong dislike, what are you going to do? You're going to start doing a lot of unskillful things. You've got to keep that person's well-being in mind. Now, this doesn't mean you have to please the person or do what that person wants, but you want to make sure you don't do anything to harm that person. So it's good to remind yourself of all the good things that that person has done for you, the help that person has given you.

It's here where the Buddha's teachings on gratitude are important. You realize that if there's somebody who has helped you and yet you turn around and are really harsh with them, or unkind, or hurtful, it's really unfair. If you respond to kindness with hurtfulness, it takes civilization down a notch. So you try to remind yourself of the good things that that person has done or thought or said for you. Even though you may feel a resistance, as if that person doesn't deserve it, or, "I'm going to be trapped in that person's net if I think nice things about the person," you have to remind yourself: "No, you're doing this for your own protection, so that when you're dealing with that person, you're not going to do anything harmful. You're not going to give rein to any of your harmful desires or reactions. It's for your own sake that you're thinking about that person's good points, because you don't want to create any bad kamma."

When you're feeling lazy, you think about death—not to get yourself depressed, but just to remind yourself that there's work to be done, and you've got a chance right now. You'd better do it now, because you can't wait until later. That way of thinking about death is actually useful. If you think about it in a way that gets you depressed, you're not using the thought right. As the Buddha said: You remind yourself, "If I get one more chance to breathe in and breathe out, I'll use it for practice." Well, here it is one more chance right now, so use it. The purpose of this is to give you the sense of the importance of right here, right now. Because you have this right here, right now, but you don't know how much longer you're going to have a right here, or a right now, so you make the best use of what you've got.

Whatever the unskillful thought, whatever the unskillful member of the committee, you've got to remember, "This is not my friend; this is not helping me." Ajaan Suwat mentions how we often hate pain but we love our cravings, without reflecting on the fact that the craving is what leads to the pain and suffering. You should have a friendlier attitude toward pain

because it reminds you: This is an issue you have to watch; this is an issue you have to learn about. Remember that your craving is the enemy.

Of course, you have to sort out which desires are helpful and which ones are not. The desire to act skillfully and to avoid doing unskillful behavior: That desire is your true friend. The craving for sensuality, the craving to take on this identity, or to destroy that identity: Those are the ones that are going to cause you suffering.

You have to sort things out. You have friends in the mind, you have enemies in the mind, and they're all labeled "you." All these different identities that you've taken on are like the wife of the dictator who had 5,000 pairs of shoes in her closet. At one point, sometimes, she must have worn those shoes, but then she kept them all. You've got thousands of selves in here and you've got to sort them out: Which are the ones that are really helpful, and which ones are enemies in disguise?

Fortunately, they can all talk with one another. This is one of the purposes of meditation: to create a neutral place where there's a sense of ease, there's a sense of well-being, so that the really hungry, exasperated, and impatient selves can be fed a sense of pleasure. Then you can talk to them and point out to them: "Okay, we can all be happy, but the happiness that this or that particular self is proposing is not going to lead to long-term happiness. It's going to lead to pain down the road." Then that self will say: "Well, I don't care. I want what I want right now." And you say, "No. Look, it's going to be painful, and if you are me, I don't want to suffer." Those selves, the ones who want pleasure right now and are willing to suffer pain down the line, are the ones that run away when the actual suffering comes, and you're left holding the bag.

So it's tricky. You're talking to your selves, and each one of them claims to be you, and you've had experience with each one of them being you at one point or another. You have to learn how to identify with the selves that want long-term happiness, that realize you have to behave responsibly in order to find that happiness, who realize that there are things that you like to do that give pleasure, and things that you don't like doing that give rise to pain in the long term. But then there are also the problematic ones, the ones who have things they like to do that give pain down the line, or things they don't like to do that give pleasure down the line. You've got to strengthen the selves that really are concerned with the long-term results, the selves that

have learned to be patient, the selves that have learned to be responsible, the selves that really do have your long-term best interest in mind.

So you have to sort out all your various allegiances here because, as I said, the difficult part is that at some point in time you have identified with all of the members of the committee. But it's best to see them as tools or as outfits you put on. Just because you put a certain outfit on back when you were a child doesn't mean you need to wear it now. In fact, it's probably inappropriate. There are some really old tools that you used at one point in time, like that Far Side cartoon of the cow's tools. You look at the tools and you don't see any possible use for them at all. But the cow is very proud that it made them. In the same way, we've created different senses of self from our I-making and my-making, and a lot of them have really limited uses.

In one sense we're doing some housecleaning here. Instead of looking at the selves as who we are, we look at them as tools. Some of them are useful, and some of them are not, and we'd be wise to throw out the ones that are not of use anymore. As for the ones who continue to hang around, learn how to convert them so that they like to meditate and want true happiness too. The same with all the different outfits you've worn: Figure out which ones are your baby clothes, which ones are the things you wore when you were six years old, 12 years old, whatever. Notice that they don't fit anymore, so give them away. Keep only the clothes that are useful. Don't get carried away by nostalgia.

If you don't see any of the selves in there that you like, well, here's one of the things we do when we meditate: We create a new sense of self around the meditation. Try to make it a healthy self. All our selves, especially the useful ones, are created around skills. We're working on a good skill here. We're learning to find a sense of well-being simply by the way we breathe, a perfectly harmless peace, a perfectly harmless pleasure. Even though it may take a while to gain a sense of skill around this, it is possible. Once you have this skill, you find that it's a really true friend.

Purity of Heart

March 9, 2005

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, it gradually dawned on me that he could read my mind. And I begin to notice that he had other unusual powers as well. He knew when things were going to happen in the future. I must admit that it had me really fascinated. It opened whole new worlds of possibilities that I'd never really taken seriously before.

He must have noted that my interest was heading off in that direction, so one evening he caught me up short. He said, "You know, the whole purpose of this practice is to find purity of heart. Everything else," he said, "is just games." That teaching really went to my heart. It reminded me of why I was there: that what's really important in the practice is to make the heart pure.

What does it mean to have a pure heart? When the Buddha talks about purity, it's largely training yourself not to think or act or speak in ways that cause anyone any harm, either yourself or other people. So the next question is, why do we harm one another? Usually it's out of fear. It might be carelessness, but deep down inside there's an element of fear. You think you can trust yourself not to do anything bad, and then all of a sudden you find yourself threatened in one way or another, and your views start getting skewed. Things you ordinarily wouldn't want to do you suddenly find yourself doing or saying or thinking. It usually comes out of fear; you feel threatened. Once there's a threat, there's a re-ordering of your priorities as to what's really important.

So how are we threatened? Why is it that everybody seems to have a price? You push them far enough and they'd be willing to do all kinds of things that they know they shouldn't do. But they can convince themselves that it's okay in these circumstances. What are those circumstances that are so threatening?

I think it all comes down to the fact that, as they say in the very first question for the novices, all beings subside on food. And "food," here, doesn't mean just physical food. Physical food is one type of food of course, but

there's also the food of contact, the food of what's called intellectual intention, and the food of consciousness. These are the things that we feed on. The body feeds on physical food. The mind feeds on the three other kinds. We feel we need these things in order to survive; that's how we keep going as beings. When our food source seems to be threatened, we react. In that way, we're no different from dogs or other animals. You threaten their food and they're going to snarl and bite. When we feel that our food is threatened, we snarl and bite, too.

So, obviously, the issue of purifying the heart comes down to learning how not to have to depend on food. This goes deeply against the habits of the mind, which feeds on everything. You think of interconnectedness as being a good thing, but basically, inter-being is inter-eating. That's what conditionality is all about. In fact, if anything could be proof that we're not really one, just look at how beings feed on one another. No one is willingly food for anyone else unless they can feed in return. If we really were one, we wouldn't have to keep feeding on one another in order to exist. There's a taking, there's an oppressing, there's a making yourself a burden to other people that's involved in the feeding. And it's a burden for you, yourself, to be constantly worried about your source of food—so worried that you could end up killing and stealing and doing all kinds of other things that you know are not right.

So how do we get past feeding? That's the problem we have to solve if we want to purify the heart.

The first step is just to look at the process as it is, as a feeding process: to look at the kind of activities that are involved in feeding. Then, to wean us off the need to feed, the Buddha teaches the right attitude we should have toward our food.

He illustrates the attitude we should adopt toward eating physical food with an analogy: the story of a couple who, with their baby son, are crossing a desert. They run out of food, and the question is: What are they going to do? They finally decide that two of them should survive instead of letting all three of them die. So they decide to kill the son and make his flesh into jerky, baby jerky. I'm sure it wouldn't sell anywhere. Then the Buddha asks: When they ate the baby jerky as they were going across the desert, would they eat it for fun or pleasure? The answer is: of course not. It would be just to keep

the body going. And they would be crying, thinking about their son, that they had to do this.

That's the attitude you should have toward physical food. Not only flesh eating, but all kinds of physical eating. Don't eat just for pleasure or for fun. There's always suffering involved in the process getting food to your mouth. The farmer suffers; the people who transport the goods suffer; there's work involved in fixing the food. It's just one, big hassle. So that's why we have that contemplation every day: We eat food not for the purpose of beautifying, nor for fun, but simply to keep the body alive and strong enough that we can practice all our life.

As for the food of sensory contact, so much of our life is spent in looking for enjoyable sensations. Then when fear-mongers come along and say, "You'll die, you'll lose all your wealth, the economy will crash if you don't go along with our agenda," we give in because we're afraid of losing not only physical food, but also food of sensory contact: the nice shows we watch, the nice clothing we can wear, all the things that feel good through the senses. The Buddha said to look at that kind of food as if you were a flayed cow, always exposed on all sides, so that no matter where you went, there would be little flies and gnats picking at your flesh. Trying to depend on this kind of contact for enjoyment is like hoping for pleasant sensations from the flies.

The food of intellectual intention, he said, is like being dragged off to a pit of burning coals, constantly on fire with this thought, that thought, wanting this, wanting that.

As for the food of consciousness, he said to compare it to a man who's been caught by a king and is condemned to be speared in the morning with 100 spears. The king asks his henchmen, "Okay is he dead?" "No, he's not dead." "Okay, spear him again at noon with another hundred spears. Is he dead yet?" "No, not quite dead yet." "Okay, spear him again in the evening with another hundred spears." That's how the food of consciousness should be viewed.

The whole purpose of these contemplations is to turn your mind away from this kind of feeding. There seems to be a certain pleasure that comes from the way we normally feed, but when we look objectively at the process of having to feed, we see that it requires us to look all the time for more food, and there's so much suffering involved in the process.

The only way you can really see these kinds of feeding in this way is to make your mind really, really still, really quiet. In other words, use the breath as your food. This involves using the food of contact, intellectual intention, and consciousness, but you turn these things into good, strong states of concentration: a more harmless form of feeding. That way, you have something to compare: There's this kind of feeding, and then there's the ordinary kind of feeding that goes on out there in the world outside. Which would you rather be involved in? When the mind is really still, there comes a sense of ease, rapture, and equanimity from the stillness. This not only gives you something to compare, but it also gives you a perspective on your life: Do you want to spend your whole life running around feeding in these ways, knowing that if you're dependent on things outside, you can't really trust yourself, you might have a price?

I saw this right after September 11th. So many Buddhist teachers caved in, wanting to ensure everyone that they weren't pacifists, that they saw the need for war, all because they feared they would lose their students. They wouldn't be popular. Seeing that was really dismaying. You have to ask yourself: Are you the sort of person who, when it comes to a certain threshold, is willing to cave in? To give in? To change your values? As long as you have to feed, there's always that potential. And if you can't trust yourself, who can you trust—and what kind of life is that?

This is why we owe it to ourselves and to the people around us, the beings around us, to strengthen the mind even beyond the food of concentration, to the point where it doesn't need to feed anymore. We strengthen the mind in our conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. When these qualities are developed, the mind reaches the point where it doesn't have to depend on any kind of food at all for its happiness.

They say that arahants have understood food, and they're totally independent of nutriment, and, as a result, you can't trace their path, in the same way that you can't trace the path of birds in the sky. They can't be traced, but they are totally reliable, totally trustworthy, because nothing could happen that would make them change their values. That's because they don't depend on anything that could be affected by anything else.

Technically, you can't even call them beings anymore, because a being, as the Buddha said, is defined by where it's attached, where it's tied down,

what it clings to. When there's no attachment, when there's no clinging, what's left can't be defined. That's another way in which the path of arahants can't be traced. It's not only their path that can't be traced—they can't be traced.

That's what it means to have purity of heart, and that's what this practice is all about. Everything else, as Ajaan Fuang said, is just games. And even though some games can be pleasant, some games can get cruel. The playful way in which some people feed can be very cruel.

This is why purity of heart is such a worthwhile ideal. It's an important gift for ourselves and for the people around us.

Feeding on the Breath

July 25, 2012

The mind's basic habit is that it's constantly feeding. Just as the body feeds on physical food, the mind feeds on sensory contact, its awareness of things at the senses—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas—and its intentions with regard to these things. It's always trying to fix its food. So right now, let's fix our food with the breath.

This is good food for the mind. It doesn't give rise to a lot of greed, aversion, or delusion. In fact, as you're feeding here in the present moment, you've got a good reliable source of food here. The mind's in a good position where it can start observing things about itself, all the processes that are going on in this process of feeding. When you understand the way the mind feeds on the breath, then you can start understanding the way it feeds on other things as well.

So try to breathe in a way that's comfortable, that gives you a sense of well-being, and learn to think about the breath in a way that makes it interesting. Think about the different ways the breath energy can flow through the body and try to observe how the breath is flowing right now. Decide whether it feels good or not. If it doesn't feel good, you can experiment. Fix new food. In other words, breathe in different ways, think about the breath in different ways that help the breath energy to flow more smoothly, so that the body feels energized by the breath, and the mind feels it can settle down with a sense of well-being.

As you do this, you learn many important things about the mind. One is that the mind is not passive. It doesn't just sit there and react only when some impulse comes from outside. The mind is actually actively out there looking for things, looking for something to feed on. If we don't find anything we like to feed on, we feed on the fact that we're disgruntled, that we're upset.

That way, the mind starts feeding on itself in an unhealthy way. This is why the Buddha recommended as a first step in practicing meditation that you try to develop as much equanimity and patience as you can. As he

taught Rahula, try to make your mind like earth. People throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn't react. Make your mind like water. Water can wash away all kinds of disgusting things, but the water doesn't react. Fire can burn disgusting things, wind can blow disgusting things around, but they don't react. They just do their thing. So this is the attitude you have to take toward things that are not good food for you—and not only unpleasant things. There are a lot of pleasant things out there that are also not good food for you. Just remind yourself: This is no place to eat. This is no place to feed. And don't get worked up over the fact that you can't feed on these things. Give yourself something better to feed on.

Otherwise, when you go into an unpleasant situation, you start feeding on the fact that "This is really unpleasant. I can't eat here. There's no nourishment for the mind, nothing I really enjoy." From there, your sense of discontent just spreads out, out, out, to cover all kinds of things that you're displeased about. You start feeding on that sense of displeasure. And although the mind gets a little bit of pleasure out of that kind of feeding, it's not really nourishing.

When you go into an unpleasant place or an unpleasant situation—dealing with unpleasant people or whatever the unpleasant thing may be—remind yourself that you've got a better place to feed inside. You can feed on the breath; you can feed on the sense of well-being you can create in the body. That's much healthier.

As for the things that would pull you away from the breath, try to be like fire toward them. Be like earth toward them. In other words, you know that this is the way the world is, and that it's not food. There's no reason to react. This applies to things that are physically unpleasant and also to words that are unpleasant as well. When people say unpleasant things, remind yourself that that's not food. And it's interesting: Here again, the Buddha has you reflect on the elements of the body. When you have a physical body, these are the kinds of things you're exposed to. You have ears and so there will be pleasant and unpleasant contact at the ears. When you can learn how to depersonalize things this way, it's a lot easier to take them.

That's what he recommends. Someone says something really unpleasant and you can remind yourself: "An unpleasant sound has made contact with the ear." And leave it just at the ear, where it can fall away. But how many times have we ever thought that way? Usually, we're out there feeding on it

already, taking it into the mind and chewing on it, and then we're upset that this is miserable food.

As Ajaan Lee says, it's like something somebody spit out, and you pick it up and you chew on it. The fact that it tastes horrible: Whose fault is that? Just leave it at where it was left, at the unpleasant contact. Depersonalize the whole thing because, after all, this is the way things are in this physical world, this human world that we inhabit. There are going to be unpleasant sounds.

Learn how to fabricate good things to feed on inside instead. This is why the Buddha never taught bare awareness. He taught that the mind is constantly fabricating, so learn how to fabricate good things. The only thing that's not fabricated is nibbana. Until you reach that point in your practice, you're going to be fabricating, so learn how to be conscious of the process and learn how to do it well. And remember that this process of fabrication is very closely related to the process of feeding on all the aggregates from which we make our sense of self. They are parallel in the process of feeding physically.

Form would be the form of the body and also the form of the food we want for the body.

Feeling would be the feeling of hunger we feel when we lack something, and the feeling of fullness we get when we've eaten our fill.

Perception has to do with our ability to perceive what kind of hunger we have, and then to perceive what out there in the world around us would satisfy that hunger: what's food and what's not food; what's food for this particular hunger or food for some other hunger.

Fabrication is the process by which we go about searching for food, finding it, fixing it, so that we can eat it.

Consciousness is our awareness of all these things.

These are all active processes, and fabrication underlies all of them. It's the mind's desire to feed, feed, feed that keeps us making these things. If we make them in an unskillful way, we're going to suffer. Even if we do them in a skillful way, there's still some stress and suffering, but it's a lot less.

And it can actually provide the path that we want. When we get the mind to settle down, we've got the form of the body. We've got the feeling that comes when we stay with the breath, the feeling of ease, as the mind

settles down with the breath, along with the perception of breath that we hold in mind, the mental picture that we have of where the breath flows. Then there's fabrication in the way we adjust the breath, learn about the breath, explore the breath. Then there's the consciousness that's aware of these things. We learn to feed on these things instead of the general garbage that we otherwise tend to feed on outside.

So it's all an active process. When we're on the path, we engage in the process but we try to do it as skillful way as possible. That's how we learn about what the mind is doing. At the same time, we can cut back a lot of the suffering that we otherwise cause ourselves. Because, as the Buddha pointed out, it's not the bad things out there in the world that make you suffer. It's the way you try to feed on them: That's why you suffer. Even the good things out in the world, when you try to feed on them, make you suffer, too.

The best things to feed on are the factors of the path, as we chanted just now: everything from right view all the way through right concentration. They provide good food for the mind—particularly right concentration. It's a sense of well-being that gives us genuine nourishment.

As we get the mind to settle down, we learn about the mind. We begin to see its feeding habits a lot more clearly.

So start looking at the breath as your food, in the well-being, in the fullness you create inside. It's food for the mind that you can provide for yourself at any time. That way, when you live in situations where there's no really good food around you, you don't have to starve. And you don't have to start feeding on unskillful thoughts inside. You carry this sense of well-being with you into every situation and you've got all the good food you need.

Practicing from Gratitude

July 27, 2012

One of the traditional idioms for practicing meditation is "making an effort." And key to making an effort is to want to do it. Otherwise, you find your mind drifting off, getting engaged in other things, and not really accomplishing anything through the meditation. In fact, part of the definition of right effort is that you generate desire. This is why Ajaan Suwat often said, when we would start meditating every evening, "Look at your mind and give rise to a sense of conviction, inspiration that this is something you really do w ant to do. If you find that your attitude is neither here nor there, think in ways that give rise to that sense of desire."

One way of thinking that I've often found helpful is to think of all the help we've received from other people: from our parents in giving birth to us and training us, teachers, everyone who has in one way or another showed us something about the goodness of the human heart and has provided us with these opportunities. Look around you here in the monastery: Everything is the result of someone's generosity—the land of the monastery, all the things that have been built in the monastery, all the activities that keep the monastery going. It's all the result of generosity. And ideally, the purpose of all that generosity is to give us an opportunity to practice. Anyone who wants to come and is sincere about the practice is welcome. There are no restrictions placed on what family you came from or what your background was. Everybody can come and practice if you want to practice.

That kind of generosity is hard to find in the world, so you want to carry it on. One of the ways of carrying it on, of course, is by practicing. Actually, meditating is a gift. It's a gift not only to yourself, but also to other people as well. When you think in these ways, it gives you a sense of inspiration. Here all that's asked of you is that you train your mind through virtue, concentration, and discernment. These are the main things we focus on. This is how we train ourselves. All of these are a form of generosity.

The Buddha also talks about the precepts as gifts, in that we're giving protection to all beings. You decide that you're not going to kill anybody, not

even little insects. No stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants. Ever. Once you decide that these are things you're going to avoid in all situations, and you carry through with that decision, it's said to be a universal gift. You're giving protection to everybody, and then you have a share in that universal protection as well.

The practice of concentration is also a gift. Instead of looking for happiness in areas where you would have to fight other people off or where you gain something and someone else has to lose, you're looking for it in an area that's totally your own territory. It's your breath, the sense of the body that you feel from within. This is totally yours to explore and to exploit, in the sense of making the most of it.

So take this time to look at what you've got here. You've got the breath coming in, going out. It has an effect on all the different parts of the body, the way you breathe. So stop and take stock of that. How are you breathing right now? What kind of breathing would feel really good? Try a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths to see if that feels nourishing or energizing. If it does, keep it up as long as it feels good. If it starts feeling like it's too much, then you can calm down, make the breath shorter, more shallow, or keep it in long but out short, or in short and out long, depending on what you feel would be best for the body right now.

Notice where the feeling of the breath is most prominent. It can be anywhere in the body. Let your attention settle there, and take that as your guide for what's going to feel good. Think of the breath as nourishing that part of the body every time you breathe in. If there's any tension in that part of the body, allow it to dissolve each time you breathe out. If you find that there's a sense of well-being—it doesn't have to be overwhelmingly nice, just a reasonably good—let it stay there. Protect it all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. If you notice that you squeeze it in any way, or push it and pull it in any way, either with the in-breath or the out-breath, stop right there. See if you can breathe without the squeezing or the pushing or the pulling.

If you get distracted, just come right back. The more quickly you can come back, the better. Because a lot of your sensitivity to how the breath is going to feel in the body requires that you stick with it continually. It's like being an inspector in a factory. Say it's a cloth factory. The cloth is going past, past, past, and you can't allow your eye to leave the cloth even for a

second because you want to make sure the whole cloth is smoothly woven. The more continual your gaze, the more refined the sense of the breath will become, and the more refined the sense of pleasure you get from it. It'll go deeper and deeper into the heart.

Then think of that sense of well-being spreading. You don't have to push it or pull it out, just think of it radiating out. You'll find it'll go more easily to some parts of the body than to others, so work with those parts first. Again, you're not trying to force it too much. Think of things opening up, opening up, opening up, so that you can allow that sense of well-being to go through the body, down through the torso, down through the legs, to the shoulders, out through the arms, out to the fingers, up through the head. Think of the whole body having a share in that sense of well-being.

As you stick with this and explore this enough, you'll begin to realize that there's a lot right here in the breath that you haven't been taking advantage of. Going out, looking for pleasure outside, is like someone who has a really good piece of land but tries to plant crops in somebody else's land: There are bound to be problems. Turn around and look at your own piece of land right here. Take care of that. See what you can grow right here. You'll find not only that you get a great sense of well-being, but that the well-being also begins to spill out for other people through your thoughts, words, and deeds. Your sense of well-being here makes it a lot easier for you to act in skillful ways. You're not so hungry for things that are going to cause trouble.

The Buddha often talks about the sense of nourishment and fullness that comes from sticking with the breath like this as food for the mind, food for your effort, for that desire that you start with. If it just stays as desire and is not properly nourished, it's going to wear out. But as you feed it properly, you realize that if you stick with this, there are rewards. That makes you want to do it even more. The mind can settle down and get a great sense of stability, solidity right here. Then you find, further, as you protect this state of concentration, that as the mind goes off into its ordinary pursuits, you begin to see more clearly which of those pursuits are actually skillful and which are not, which give rise to needless suffering and which are actually part of the path.

This is where discernment begins to grow out of the concentration. As you protect the concentration, you begin to see what destroys it, what levels

of stress or suffering you add to your life. Some people say they don't have any suffering in life, but I don't know anybody who doesn't admit to having stress. Well, the stress that really weighs down the heart is the stress that you impose on yourself, often unintentionally, almost always unintentionally. As a general rule, we tend to desensitize ourselves to that. We think that is just part of the way that things have to be, so we put up with it. But once you discover that you can find this sense of well-being inside, you begin to realize that some of the things you've put up with you don't have to put up with anymore. Fortunately, the things that really weigh down the mind are things you do to yourself. So you have the choice to weigh yourself down or not.

This is how discernment begins to grow out of concentration. And, as the Buddha said, as your discernment gets more and more refined, it can begin to dig deeper and deeper into the mind, until it gets down to the roots of what's causing all this trouble inside: what the Buddha called asava, and we can translate as effluents. These are things that come flowing out of the mind: greed, aversion, delusion, flowing out of the mind. Our desire to be this or that: That comes flowing out of the mind. Discernment, when it's fully developed, as the Buddha says, can cut these things, cut the flow, and the mind is no longer flooded by suffering. This, too, is a gift you give to yourself that you also give to the people around you. Because those effluents, when they flow out, don't just flow into your mind. They also flow out through your thoughts, words, and deeds, the impact you have on other people.

Learning how to cut these things is part of the way of repaying some of your debts. They say that the person who has totally cut the defilements of the mind has no more debts to anyone, anywhere. In fact, one of the motivations for practicing is that the more you practice, the greater the rewards that come to the people who support your practice.

In this way, that thought of gratitude with which we started the practice goes all the way through. It's like a thread that connects the practice of generosity, virtue, concentration, and discernment, all the way to the freeing of the mind. After all, these are forms of goodness that don't have limitations; they're forms of happiness that don't create borders and boundaries. If your happiness depends on material gain, status, or praise, those are things that, when you gain them, someone else loses them, and

that creates a boundary right there. But generosity, virtue, concentration, discernment, the release of the mind: Nobody loses, so these things don't have boundaries. This is why the practice is in no way selfish at all. It's a huge gift.

This is one of the ways of giving a sense of inspiration, a sense of gladness in what we're doing here. It's one of the ways in which we repay our debts. We create more and more goodness to share, because the goodness of the world: Where does it come from? It comes from within the mind that's trained. The world certainly needs a lot more goodness, and here's your way of providing it. Always try to maintain your sense of being inspired in the practice, because it's the best thing you can do.

For the Survival of Your Goodness

June 20, 2011

Try to notice what way of breathing seems most refreshing. Notice where in the body you're most sensitive to how the breathing has an impact on your feelings. These sensations may be around the heart, in the throat, in the middle of the head. Where are you most sensitive to the impact of the breath? And what way of breathing feels most soothing, refreshing, and nourishing right there? Stay with that spot in the body for a while and let it be healed, let it be strengthened. Because having a sense of well-being that you can tap into whenever you need it is essential to your survival, i.e., the survival of the goodness of your mind.

When the Buddha says that heedlessness is the path to death, he's not talking just about physical death. He's also talking about the death of the mind's good qualities, its inner strengths. These are your most important treasures because they determine, on the one hand, what you're going to do, how you're going to act, how you're going to speak, how you're going to think; and those things, of course, have a huge impact on your life, now and on into the future. They can even leap over the fact of death and go on into the next life. That's how far their impact can extend. In fact, not just one next lifetime: sometimes many next lifetimes. Your actions are that important.

So make sure you have the strengths you need in order to maintain the desire to be skillful. Because the world can tear away at that very easily if you're out looking for your nourishment in the world.

That's the other reason we try to find nourishment inside, because the more independent we are here, the less we open ourselves up to the attacks of the world. Just the fact of being subject to sensory input, the Buddha says, is like being eaten at, like a cow whose skin has been flayed is being eaten at by insects all the time. Even worse than that is when we to go out and try to

feed on these things. And, of course, the more you feed on things outside the mind, the more you're opening yourself to outside influences, good and bad. When you're really hungry, you tend to get pretty indiscriminate.

So as you feed yourself with a sense of well-being inside that comes both from the inner sense of physical well-being that you can maintain with the breath, and the mental well-being that comes as your mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment get stronger, your food-source gets more secure. You find yourself taking less and less from the world, and having more and more to give. It's not like we're shutting ourselves off on a little island, refusing to have any contact with anybody else. That's not what the practice is all about. The practice is developing the mind so that you benefit and the people around you benefit, too.

So try to maintain this sense of inner strength, inner well-being, so that you can deal with whatever comes up, and not get wasted away by it, not get drained by it, and not expose yourself to the influences of the world. After all, the values of the world are all very strange. Someone once noted: All the people in the human race know they're going to die, and yet they act as if they didn't know: scrambling after this, that, and the other thing, trying to defend what little they have. Yet it's all going to slip away from their grasp.

And they want other people to see things the way they do. Ajaan Fuang once noted that this doesn't apply just to human beings. There are even devas out there who are a little scared by people who practice meditation, who practice the Dhamma for freedom. It calls into question what they're doing. A lot of people don't like to have that called into question.

So we maintain our own inner stability. In a way, being a meditator is like being a turtle. The turtle has a very, very tender body, which is why it needs its hard shell. You maintain the tenderness of a very sensitive mind inside, but you need to have the shell that comes when you're not feeding on things outside.

I was once teaching at a retreat, and one of the retreatants to came up after a couple of days and said, "You know, I came back from last night's session and I realized I was really angry at you." I said, "Oh? Why?" And he said: "Well, I've been thinking about it. Ever since you came here, I haven't been able to figure out where your buttons are." So I made light of it and said, "That's why we wear robes, so that you can't see our buttons."

But the issue goes deeper than that. If you're a meditator, people try to push your buttons, and they find they can't push the buttons. Some of them really don't like that. Which means, of course, that they're trying to control you, and are frustrated by the lack of control. But if you can be button-free in this way, that's how you can survive in this world—how your goodness can survive: the goodness that nourishes you from within, and the goodness you have to offer to others.

So it's not a selfish practice, and it's not an unfeeling or hardhearted practice. It's simply a very practical, clear-eyed approach to what you have to do in order to maintain the most precious things you have—the good qualities in the mind—in the face of everything and everybody that would try to drain them or strip them away.

So try to find this center that feels really, really good. This is how you can maintain mindfulness and alertness throughout the day. Because if it's just something that you tell yourself you should do and it's not pleasant, the mind is going to find all kinds of reasons for wandering off, slipping away when you're not looking. But if you can maintain a sense of well-being, tap into it, keep it going, and allow it to do its work, both on the body and on the mind, you discover a strength that you didn't realize you had.

Now, there are times when the simple sense of well-being from the breath isn't enough, because there are bits and pieces of your attention that keep slipping off. In other words, you've got outside concerns that don't allow you to stay here really 100%. Sometimes it's useful then, at the beginning of the meditation, to remind yourself of the things you don't have to pay attention to. Consciously tell yourself, "I'm putting aside this and that responsibility." All the people and issues in life that tend to pull you out, and say to yourself, "For the time being, those issues are far away." Then be true to that determination. You know that at the end of the meditation you'll have to pick these things up again, but don't let them eat away at your awareness while you're here.

This practice of consciously reminding yourself of what you're not going to think about can help protect your space. Because as soon as you find your thoughts wandering off in that direction, you remind yourself, "Hey, remember I don't need to go there." Then you'll begin to notice how often your thoughts tend to wander in that direction. No wonder you feel frazzled by the end of the day.

You have to be especially careful with the things that tend to pull you away unthinkingly. And the best way to not be unthinking is to think about them at the beginning of the practice. Tell yourself: You're not going to think about your family, you're not going to think about your job, or whatever other responsibilities there may be. You'll just put them aside.

There was a woman who came to practice in the monastery one time in Thailand. She was going to stay for two weeks, but toward the end of the second day, she came to say goodbye to Ajaan Fuang. She was going to go home. He asked her why. She said, "I'm worried about the people at home, what they're going to do without me: how they're going to get along, what they're going to eat, who's going to wash the clothes." He said to her, "Pretend that you've died. Tell yourself you're dead now. You can't go back. They're sure to be able to look after themselves without you." She did, and she was able to stay on for the whole two weeks. Sometimes it's good to have a knife like that to cut through your thoughts.

Of course, you have to be able to do this not only when you're away from home, but also when you're right in the midst of the house and all the affairs of the house. It's almost as if your nervous system were plugged into the electric wires in the house: Everything in the house is connected to you. So you have to unplug. This goes for family, it goes for work, all the other things that tend to pull you out and insist that you have to look after them right now. You say, "No, not right now. At the end of the session." Give the mind its own space so that it really can benefit from being right here at the most sensitive spots in the body, where the breath is doing its healing work. As you let go of those other responsibilities, have a little touch of goodwill, so it's not an angry rejection. It's simply: "Okay, goodwill for you, but in order to deal with you effectively, I'm going to need some time on my own. So goodwill for everybody," and then pull the plug.

Think of the meditation as food, medicine, shelter for the mind, and give it the care it needs. Then learn how to take some of that sense of nourishment around with you as you go through the day, so that you can keep in touch with it, tap into it when you need it, and not just feed on the leftover food from your meditation session. Learn how to produce that sense of well-being as you move through the day, and you'll find that the goodness of the mind—all the good qualities that you need for yourself and for others—will stay nourished and won't dry up.

It's in this way that your practice becomes akāliko, timeless, where you don't just shut it off into a few minutes here, a few minutes there. Every time throughout the day becomes a time to nourish the mind, keep it nourished, keep it strong, keep it well centered, well established. This is how you take care of your most precious resources and allow them to grow.

After-work Meditation

October 22, 2011

I once had a student in Singapore who told me that at the end of the day, when he came home from work, he'd sit down and dump out all the garbage in his mind. At work, he felt like a garbage pail. At the end of the day, after all kinds of people had been throwing their garbage into his pail, he came back and, in order to survive, before he did anything else at home, he had to sit down and meditate for a while, to dump the garbage out. As I told him, ideally it's best not to keep the garbage even that long. See if you can cut a big hole in the bottom of your garbage pail, so that when people throw things in, it just goes right through.

This doesn't mean that you ignore criticism, because sometimes criticism is useful, sometimes it's right. There are things you can learn from other people. But there is that tendency to hang on to things, especially when the criticism is not right. The sense of being abused, the sense of being mistreated, is probably the strongest sense of self we have. But what does it accomplish? You suffer from it, and it just compounds your suffering.

So that's something you've got to look at: the extent to which you hold on to the fact that you been victimized, that you've been mistreated, especially when it's true. We're not denying that there are victimizers out there. But you're actually helping them in their mistreatment of you by hanging on to it. They say something once, and you say it over and over again in your mind many times. It's as if they stabbed you once with a knife and then threw it down on the ground, and you pick it up and keep stabbing yourself with it.

So this is a habit we've got to learn how to overcome so that we don't carry these things around. If you find that you have been carrying this sort of stuff around, it's wise at the end of the day to sit down and see how much you can clear things out.

Of course, meditation is an ideal way of doing this. But many times it's hard to get with the breath. So you have to look at what you're saying to yourself. As you sit down to meditate, what's the topic of conversation?

Instead of doing walking meditation, do talking meditation. We have to learn how to talk well to ourselves. This is what directed thought and evaluation are about. To get the mind to settle down, you have to talk to it, to get it in the right mood. Talk to it in ways that will allow it to let go.

So take a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths. Make that your foundation. Then remind yourself of some of the topics of inner conversation that can help you let go of those things you're holding on to.

One is the reminder of the principle of kamma: that the things that have happened to you are not nearly as important as the things you do. What's coming at you could be the result of old kamma, but that's no reason to get down on yourself if it's very negative. After all, everybody has negative kamma in the past. But you have to ask yourself: How are you responding now? What are you making of that? What other people do to you, as the Buddha once said, is not going to make you go to hell, but what you do could make you go to hell. We don't have to worry about hell after death. Focus on the hell that you put yourself into right now.

Ask yourself not what other people did to you in the course of the day, but what did you do? It's like that woman who wanted to train her son to think. So at the end of the school day, she didn't ask him, "What did you learn?" She asked him, "What questions did you ask?" Think about what you're able to do in the course of the day, and what actions you did that were not all that skillful, and make the resolve that you're going to try to be more skillful the next time around. This way, you change the focus. Remind yourself that you do have a role where you can be more proactive in life, and that it's what you do with the situation that makes all the difference. The situation may be bad, but you can turn it into something good. It's like being an alchemist. You take lead and other base metals and you try to turn them into gold, i.e., an opportunity for you to do good.

There was one time when Ajaan Fuang took a group of his students up to the chedi on one wan phra. When they got up there, they found that someone had left garbage all over the place. So Ajaan Fuang led the group in by picking up the garbage. Someone complained, "How could anybody think of throwing garbage around a place like this?" Ajaan Fuang replied, "Don't complain. They gave you an opportunity to do some good. Here's your opportunity to clean up."

That's one way you can reframe things. Another is to spread thoughts of goodwill, starting with yourself. Remind yourself that the kind of chatter that makes you miserable is not showing goodwill to yourself. It's not helping anything in anyway. Learn how to speak to yourself in a way that shows compassion, that shows goodwill, really does wish for your true happiness. A part of the mind has a tendency to believe in the negative things more than in the positive, so it feels fake to remind yourself of how much you really do want true happiness. But don't you want to happiness? Can't you allow yourself to think that thought? Part of the mind will say, "But look at all these horrible people and what they're doing." Well, that's their business. That's their kamma. You don't have to go around collecting other people's bad kamma and weighing yourself down.

Take a couple of good, long, deep breaths again. Air things out. Think about how petty a lot of the issues are that you get worked up about—the things that people say and do. You know that ten years from now you're going to totally forget them. Or you'll look back on today and say, "How could I let myself get so worked up about those things? Why did I waste my time?" So try to take a longer view of the day. It's not just today. You've got a whole life, and it's a being eaten away day by day by day. Do you want it to be eaten up by these things?

Take a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths again. In other words, learn how to talk to yourself in a way that's really helpful until you can decide that, yeah, you are ready to let go of the issues of the day, and try to get back to your home base, which is the breath.

You'll find that once you can enlarge your awareness to fill the body like this, it's harder to think about the past and the future. It's as if the mind, in order to think about the past or the future, has to make itself very small, and then it can slip down the passageways. But if you're firmly here, fully inhabiting your body right now, it can't fit down the passageways. Think that you're one with the breath energy in the different parts of the body, you can use that breath energy to spread healing and soothing energies.

Ask yourself: Where do you feel okay right now? Take that as the center of your awareness. Then for areas that feel tense or tight, overworked, think of the good energy from your good spots spreading to those other spots. Again, the emphasis here is on the positive. The more soothed the body feels, the less it wants to hang on to the things that make it suffer. It's funny, it's

because we suffer and indulge in our suffering and complain about it that we make ourselves suffer even more. If there's a sense of well-being that you can breathe into the body, you can start asking yourself: Why would you want to hold on to those things? In this way, you can gradually pull yourself out of those old habits of thinking, of going around and picking up the garbage and carrying the garbage around.

The mind does have this tendency to be like a vacuum cleaner: It picks up all the dirt and all the dust. To what purpose? Shake out the garbage, shake out the vacuum cleaner bag, and then, to whatever extent you can, be aware of the breath here in the present moment. Focus on that wherever you feel it. Again, make the emphasis on the spots that feel okay. They may not feel overwhelmingly rapturous or blissful, but the bliss and the rapture come from the areas that are simply okay to begin with. Give them some space. When you give them some space, they can develop in intensity. The body does begin to feel blissful; it does begin to feel rapturous. Try to allow these feelings to fill, and to seep into all the parts of the body that have been starved. You might think about the area inside the brain, the area in your shoulders, all the parts of the body that tend to carry the tension around. Let them have as much good breath energy as they need.

In other words, try to get more and more interested in what you can do here in the present moment, the opportunities you have for creating a better energy field in the body, soothing the patterns of tension, soothing the areas that feel overworked, so that the mind has better things to feed on.

Spread thoughts of goodwill to all the people you've dealt with in the course of the day, and that you're going to be dealing with tomorrow. You do that at the beginning of the session: That's to help clear the air so that you can meditate. Then do it again at the end of the session to set your intention straight for the next day. Because if you come at the other people with a sense of being hungry and suffering, they're going to pick it up. Then they may want to just throw a little extra garbage your way. Come with the sense of goodwill, a sense of fullness and strength: That'll change the equation.

This is what you carry out of the meditation: the reminder that it's not what other people do that matters, it's what you do. And you want to be more proactive, developing the strength inside so that your pro-activeness fills more and more of your attention, and grows more and more skillful.

That way, you'll begin to find, as you come home in the evening, that you've been collecting less and less garbage, and you'll have less to throw out.

This is how you put that hole in the garbage pail, so that whatever gets thrown in, goes right through. You have the choice of keeping only the good things and letting the bad things just vaporize. The image I sometimes use for meditation is good for going through the day: Think of your mind as a large screen, like the screen on a window. The wind blows through, but the screen doesn't catch the wind. Allow all the negative things to go through, go through, and you'll have less to weigh you down.

A Culture of Self Reliance

August 14, 2009

When you practice the Dhamma, you're you taking on a new culture. And it's not Asian culture, it's what the Buddha called the customs of the noble ones. Because even in Asia, when people are practicing, if they are really serious about the practice, they have to go against a lot of the customs that they grew up with. We tend to think of the Forest Tradition as embedded in Thai culture, and to some extent it is, but it's good to remember that when Ajaan Mun was starting out he was often attacked, criticized for not following Thai customs. He didn't live the way most Thai monks lived. He didn't eat or dress the way most Thai monks ate or dressed. When people would criticize him to his face, he'd say, "I'm not interested in Thai customs or Lao customs or the customs of any country, because those are the customs of people with defilements. They're not the customs that lead to awakening." He wanted to find the customs of the noble ones and live by those customs so that he could become a noble one as well.

This is a tradition that goes way back. One of the traditional stories in the commentaries is of the Buddha returning to his home after his awakening. The very first day after he got there, early in the morning, he went out for alms. His father, a noble warrior, was very upset because nobody in their family lineage had ever done anything like this. So he went out to criticize the Buddha. The Buddha replied, "I'm not a member of that lineage any more. I'm a member of the lineage of the noble ones, and this is one of the customs of the noble ones: to go for alms."

It's important that we think about this as we practice, because a very large part of our mind, a very large factor in our habits, comes from the customs we grew up with. And we live in a society where the customs are based on defilement. So much of the mass media, so many of the books and magazines, TV shows, movies, are aimed at increasing our defilements. So a lot of our conversation with other people falls in line with those influences. Our interactions with other people are colored by those views, by those values.

There comes a point, when you're practicing the Dhamma, that you realize that your values have become different. You've stepped out of society. You've stepped out of the dominant culture. Then there's the question of how to still live in that culture, how to negotiate the relationship. Your basic motto is, as they say on those Christian decals, Not of This World. You live in the world but you're not of the world. In other words, your values for yourself, your attitudes about what you're going to do and what you are going to say, have to stay in line with the customs of the noble ones. You have to protect that part of your mind, protect that part of your practice. Don't allow anybody to make inroads on it.

There are basically four values. The first three have to do with contentment: contentment with whatever food comes your way, contentment with whatever clothing comes your way, contentment with whatever shelter comes your way, learning to have a sense of enough that you don't need all that much in order to be happy. The fourth principle has to do with discontent: that you take delight in developing, you take delight in abandoning. Here of course it means developing skillful qualities of mind and abandoning unskillful ones; developing skillful words and deeds, and abandoning unskillful ones; being discontent in the sense of seeing that there's always room for improvement, or at the very least, making sure that you don't lose whatever qualities you already have.

It's not just that you follow these values. The Buddha adds that you have to see the dangers of being proud about them. We're not doing this to make ourselves better than other people. We're doing these things because we see that our minds are suffering, and the dominant values of the culture are not helping. They're increasing our suffering.

So you need to develop a sense of independence. You need to have a sense of self-reliance as you maintain these values, keeping in mind the fact that you're doing it because the mind has its illnesses, the mind has its diseases, and you need to treat them. So you don't make a show of your practice. It would be like making a show of the medicine you have to take because you're sick. You do the practice quietly. Simply internalize as much of the Dhamma as you can.

This is where the concept of refuge comes in. On the one hand, we're taught to take the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as our refuge. You always try to keep them in mind. The word sarana, refuge, also means

something you remember, something you hold in mind. For instance, we hold in mind the life of the Buddha. As we live our lives, there is always a narrative that we're patterning our lives on—someone we may have admired when we were younger, or something from the typical narrative of the culture. But it's good to keep the Buddha's narrative in mind as well: someone who could have spent his life immersed in sensual pleasures, but he didn't. He could have spent his life in self-torment, extreme asceticism, but he didn't. Instead, he found the middle way that led to true happiness inside, a deathless happiness, a happiness that doesn't depend on any conditions at all. And he was able to do it not because he was some special divine being, but because he took the issue of happiness really seriously and he developed whatever qualities of mind were needed. So you want to keep that fact in mind to keep the narrative of your life in perspective.

Similarly with the Dhamma and the Sangha: There is a path of practice, and the Sangha, the noble Sangha, shows that it yields results. That noble Sangha is not just composed of monks and nuns. There are a lot of laymen and laywomen who have followed the Dhamma and found that what the Buddha said is true.

So when taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, you're trying to keep these things in mind so as to keep the issues of your life in perspective: what's important, what's not important; where you can make compromises, where you can't. But the refuge becomes true only when you can internalize it.

This is why those customs of the noble ones are really helpful. The more self-reliant you are in terms of being able to make do with whatever food, clothing, and shelter come your way, the less you're worried about what people think about you, how you look in the eyes of others. That way, you're free to focus more of your attention on developing your inner refuge. The freedom that comes from contentment with external things also gives you perspective on what work to take on to make your living. You just need enough in order to be able to practice. Most of the jobs that go beyond that also take a lot of time and a lot of energy, making it harder to practice. So there is a trade-off. You look for your sustenance in terms of the qualities of mind you can develop. You learn how to feed, as the Buddha says, on rapture, like the radiant gods. Develop good strong concentration, which he compared to rice, beans, honey, butter: good food for the mind.

The more you can feed your mind on these qualities, the easier it is to live with less and less outside, which makes you have a smaller footprint, you're a lot more self-reliant. There is a greater and greater sense of independence.

Once I was helping to teach a group retreat, and one evening after giving a talk, one of the retreatants went back to his room and, as he told me the next morning, he realized that he was really angry with me. He told me about it the next morning. I said, "Oh, what made you angry?" He said, "All the time you've been here, I've never been able to figure out where your buttons are." I said, "That's why we wear robes." I meant that in two ways. One, you can't see my buttons because they're all covered by the robes. But two, by wearing robes, I have fewer needs in terms of clothing. Because I have fewer needs, I have fewer buttons that people can see that they can push.

But this principle doesn't apply just to monks. It applies to laypeople as well. You keep your needs to a minimum, you're less tied to what other people think about you, or want out of you—because you want less out of them.

So the customs of the noble ones are customs of self-reliance, customs of independence. After all, we are looking for freedom, and it doesn't come only at the end of the path. We try to find what freedom we can on the path as well. Freedom means responsibility; it entails the need to be self-reliant. Fortunately, we don't have to keep reinventing the Dhamma wheel every day. We do have the example of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha to give us guidance, to give us support, as we internalize their example, so that the mind really can become its own refuge. Atta hi attano natho: The self is its own mainstay. It becomes its mainstay when it's well trained.

As long as you need outside help, keep looking to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha for your inspiration, for your support, for your nourishment. This will provide you with the environment you need to keep your values straight, keep your priorities straight, so that the customs of defilement don't overwhelm you, don't eat away at your practice. It's bad enough that you've got defilements in your own mind, so you want to be able to resist as much as possible the influence of defilements from outside, the things that feed defilement from outside, regardless of what the dominant culture says.

A Wilderness Mind at Home

October 13, 2006

Seclusion is an important part of the practice. Coming away to a place like this, where you're away from your normal responsibilities, your normal environment, throws the spotlight directly on your mind. And it pulls away a lot of the barriers to the practice, at least the outside barriers. You're left with the inside ones, but they're a lot easier to handle when you don't have the outside barriers getting in your way.

So while you're here, try to stay focused on this quality of seclusion, not only physical seclusion, getting away from other people, but also mental seclusion. You don't have to pal around with your thoughts of past or future. Try to be right here. That's why we focus on the breath. When you're with the breath, you know you're in the present moment. You can't watch any future breaths; you can't watch any past breaths. They're not here. So as long as you're with the sensation of breathing, you know you're in the present moment.

Any thoughts that pull you away from here you know are thoughts you don't want to get involved with. Do your best to let them go. If you find yourself wandering off and chatting up the past or chatting up the future, just drop the conversations and come back here. Remind yourself that the breath is always here, coming in, going out. The more comfortable you can make it, the easier it'll be to stay. It'll have an appeal. It's not like you're forcing yourself up against a wall. You're actually providing yourself with a nice comfortable place to stay. Try to make a home in the present moment, where you can be by yourself and at your ease.

The problem, though, is that you can't stay here forever. So the trick is to learn how to develop an attitude of a mental seclusion even when you're not physically secluded. This is especially important when you find yourself surrounded by people who don't share your values in the practice. The dominant culture out there places a lot of value on money, material things, power, influence—what Twiggy once called "all those horrible things: beauty, power, money." Those are the dominant values out there. And

meditation, you have to remember, is not just a technique. It's a set of values as well. The values hold the technique in place. They go together.

You have to make sure that your values are strong, so that they don't get trampled by the values of other people. This is why you need to create an environment for yourself through your own actions. This is an important principle in the practice: that your actions really do create your world. We may be sitting here in the same room, but each of us is in a separate world. Learn how to take advantage of that fact. When you're with other people, you realize that those other people have their separate worlds and you don't have to buy into their worlds, as long as you make your world strong. You do that through your actions: what you do, what you say, what you think.

The Buddha lists five instructions appropriate for new monks, but they also apply to any meditator trying to create an ideal environment at home.

The first is that you stick with the precepts, because the main environment in your life, the main external environment, is shaped by what you do. The environment you create by killing, stealing, having illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants, is very different from the environment you create by not killing, not stealing, not having any illicit sex, not lying, not taking intoxicants. It's a very different life.

Someone once asked Ajaan Suwat, "What are the most important instructions for meditating out in lay life?" He said, "The five precepts." It may sound strange to look at the precepts as meditation instructions, but remember that the Pali word for meditation is "to develop." While you're looking after the precepts, you're developing important qualities of mind: you're developing mindfulness by trying to keep the precepts in mind; you're developing alertness by watching over your actions.

You're developing discernment as well, because you find yourself in situations where it seems tempting to lie, or it might even seem to be the compassionate thing to lie to somebody to prevent them from hearing harsh truths. But once you've made the promise to yourself not to lie, you have to find a discerning way not to lie, and yet not to harm anyone.

The Buddha doesn't tell you to tell all, all the time. His basic principle is that some things are true and beneficial, and some things are true but not beneficial. He said to avoid the things that are true but unbeneficial. Focus on the ones that are beneficial. That gives you an important principal for filtering your words. Then you notice that even the things that are beneficial

are sometimes pleasing to your listeners and sometimes not, in which case you have to figure out the right time to say something pleasing, and the right time to say something that's not.

As you look after your speech in this way, it requires that you be very mindful, very alert, very discerning, and very focused on what you're doing: precisely qualities you need as you're doing more formal meditation.

At the same time, you create a world in which it's easier to meditate. You find that people that you attract to yourself by holding to the precepts are very a very different crowd from the ones you attract by breaking the precepts. You yourself, when you sit down to meditate, are not dogged by thoughts of the wrong you've done to someone else. You don't find yourself tied up in denial or thoughts of regret or remorse.

So that's the first element in creating a good environment: following the precepts.

The second one is restraint of the senses. Notice how you look at things. Are you looking for the purpose of lust? Are you looking for the purpose of not having lust? You can look at the same things with totally different purposes and get totally different results. This again emphasizes the role you play in creating your own mental world. There are lots of things out there that you can't help but see, hear, smell, taste, or touch. But the way you go out toward them makes all the difference as to the effect they'll have on your behavior. This is why the Buddha didn't teach just breath meditation, he taught contemplation of the body. When there's lust arising, you can look at the parts of the body that really counteract lust. The body isn't 100% lustworthy. There's a lot in there that's pretty disgusting. If you find yourself in a situation where lust is not going to be very helpful to your life, you focus on the things that will calm it down.

The same with anger. We feel we get a lot done by anger, but actually the anger is not a help. I mean, seeing wrongs that have to be righted, and doing what you can to right them, is one thing. Getting all tied up in anger over them, though, is something else. It's no help, because you start miscalculating the effect of your thoughts, words, and deeds, and you end up shooting yourself in the foot. So you have to learn that when someone does something that really needs to be changed, or undone, or stopped, you have to do it with an attitude of goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the people harmed by that other person's actions, and also goodwill for the person

who's doing the harmful action, realizing that they're harming themselves in the long run. You want to try to figure out a skillful way to stop the harm without getting tied up in anger.

When the Buddha talks about dealing with hateful people, he gives the image of someone walking through the desert, tired, hot, and thirsty: That's you living in a world of people you dislike. Because if you're surrounded by bad people, and all you can focus on is their bad traits, you start getting thirsty, you're deprived of nourishment. The water here is seeing the good in other people. So you have to look for it even if, as the Buddha said, it's only as much as the water in a cow's footprint. You treasure it because you're hot, tired, and thirsty.

So, again, what you're looking for makes all the difference in what you see, what you listen for makes all the difference in what you hear, and so on down the line. It can create radically different environments for how you practice.

The third principle is restraint over your mouth. Try to say only the things that are really worth saying: true, useful, and appropriate for the time and place. If that means you end up saying a lot less, well, fine. Because all too often the trouble we get into with our mouths is when we talk with no purpose at all: when we're nervous, when we think we're creating a good impression on other people, or trying to create a good impression, so anything that pops into our head pops right out the mouth without any security gate to check for bombs and explosives.

You find that often times your own words are more destructive than anything else you do, or anything else out there. So always be clear that when you open your mouth to say something, you have a purpose. You want your words to serve that purpose. Once they've served the purpose, then you stop.

Learning how to cut down on your outside chatter helps to really cut down on your inside chatter as well, because you learn to start investigating your own thoughts with those same principles: What's true, what's beneficial? If it's not true, don't think about it. If it's not beneficial, even if it is true, don't think about it. Try to find the right time and the right place to think about things. Learning these habits in your outside behavior helps a lot in learning how to apply them inside.

The fourth principle is, for the monks, trying to find wilderness for seclusion. For laypeople, it translates into trying to find some measure of seclusion, physical seclusion, wherever you can find it. Create a space in your home that's just your spot for meditating, and don't do anything else when you're in that spot. Cut back on the amount of unnecessary information you're taking in from the media so that you're not cluttering up your mind.

Try to develop a wilderness mind. Remember what it's like to be in the wilderness: You're out, away from your daily responsibilities. It's just you and nature. All the affairs of the world start to seem really small, really petty, and the concerns that loom so big in your life start seeming a lot smaller. You get more in touch with the big issue in life, which is how the mind treats itself.

So try to develop that attitude as you go through life. Try to maintain periods of physical seclusion, and then try to keep that wilderness mind going wherever you are as you stay with the breath. Because the values of the wilderness mind help to repel a lot of the unhealthy values that come in from society.

The fifth quality that creates your environment is developing right view, which, on the most basic level, means believing in the power of your actions: that what you do creates your environment more than anything else. Some of the things you experience are the results of past actions, which you can't change, but there's an awful lot that's the result of what you're doing right now. So the more you focus on that, the better the results will be. Don't let yourself get tied up about things coming in from the past that you can't change. Focus instead on what you can change right now. That way, you find yourself wasting a lot less energy, and it leads you to focus more and more on your own mind. Because your mind is where your actions come from.

That leads to the second level of right view, which is seeing things in terms of what you're doing that's causing stress and suffering, and what you can do that's going to alleviate stress and suffering. Because that's the big issue in life. Everything we do, we do for the purpose of happiness. Yet so many of our actions bring suffering. This is the big paradox, the big irony in life. Sometimes, the more we struggle for happiness, the more of a mess we create, largely through our ignorance. So you've got to look into what you're

doing, and how your actions create stress, and how they can not create stress. Look especially at the actions of the mind. You can be sitting here perfectly still, there's nothing oppressing you right now, there's no wind blowing on you, and yet you get blown away by your thoughts. There's nothing weighing down on you, and yet you get weighed down by your mind.

You've got to look into that. This is why we meditate: to gain a better sense of what the mind is doing, to watch it in action. Look at your thoughts without getting sucked into them. See them simply as events coming and going in the mind, as part of a causal chain. When you think in certain ways, what happens as a result? It's not an issue of whether you like or don't like that thinking, just look at what it creates in the mind. If you see that it's wreaking havoc in the mind, you've got to change your thoughts. You've got to change your attitudes.

The Buddha once said that one of the most basic measures of your discernment and wisdom is when you see that something you like to do is causing harm and you're able to talk yourself out of wanting to do it. If there's something you don't like to do that is actually beneficial, you know how to talk yourself into wanting to do it. That's a basic wisdom that underlies all the wisdom teachings, all the way up to the really refined ones like the emptiness leading all the way to release. So try to develop that very pragmatic kind of wisdom.

What this means is that you create an environment where outside influences are pushed out a little bit, kept at bay, so that you can focus on the real issue in life, which is what the mind is doing right now, and how it can learn to do it more skillfully. When you can create this environment through the precepts, through restraint of the senses, restraint of your mouth, developing a sense of wilderness in your life, and developing right view, you can develop a sense of mental seclusion even when there's not much physical seclusion around you. You develop the values that are an important part of the meditation.

Remember it's not just the technique that's important for the meditation, it's the values that keep it going, that motivate the technique, motivate the practice, that keep you focused on where the really important issues in your life are, right here, right now. Everyone else in the world says the important things in life are things that somebody else is doing some

other place. That's the message you've got to resist. The message that tells you that true happiness is impossible so you should focus on the kind of happiness you can buy, teaches disrespect for the most important issue in life, which is: How can you find true happiness? What, when you do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness? That's another wisdom issue according to the Buddha.

Have respect for your desire for true happiness. Have respect for what the mind is doing right now—it's power to change your life. This is what the whole issue of values comes down to: What do you respect? The world out there has a lot of strange ideas of respect. So you've got to watch out for them.

Remember that this is why we bow down to the Buddha, because he gave respect to his desire for true happiness, and then passed the method for finding that happiness on to us. We respect him because he teaches us to respect the most valuable things in our own lives: the power of our actions, the power of our discernment to lead to release. So protect that attitude of respect the same way you'd protect a tiny fire that you're trying to start—as when you set fire to a couple of twigs when there's a wind blowing and you've got to keep your hands cupped around it until it finally takes. The warmth that comes from the fire, when it really does take, will warm not only you, but also the people around you.

Skills to Take Home

August 25, 2010

The atmosphere of seclusion we have here is really conducive to the practice. Even though the seclusion isn't total—we're not living in silence—still the basic values are conducive to looking into your own mind, because that's the bottom line here: Each of us is training his or her own mind, so we don't feel strange or out of place. The values here point inward, and that set of values is as important as the physical seclusion.

The problem when you're not here is: How do you maintain those values? Because you can't take the physical atmosphere of the monastery with you. What you can take with you, though, are the skills you've been learning here: how to focus on the mind, how to focus on the breath, how to allow the breath to be comfortable—not just the in-and-out breath, but the breath energy throughout the body. That's an important skill right there. It gives you a link to what you've been doing here.

These are skills that are useful not only when you're sitting here with your eyes closed or doing walking meditation. They're useful all the time. When you're in difficult situations, you can still work with the breath and, at the very least, it gives you a sense of having your space when other people seem to be invading your space. You can have your own little fortress inside.

At the same time, the energy of the breath can form a shield. Because when your awareness fills the body—good breath energy fills the body—it's very difficult for other people's energy to penetrate, to invade. All too often we leave huge gaps, huge sections of the body undefended, and other people will invade them. We pick up their moods, we pick up their attitudes, and then it's hard to shake them off. But as you fill the body with your awareness, with breath energy flowing throughout all the different parts of the body, you feel at ease and you're also protected. The image the Buddha gives is of a door made of hardwood. If someone throws a ball of string at the door, it can't penetrate the door at all. Most people's minds, he said, are like clay. When people throw a stone into the clay, it makes a huge impression. So this is just one of the skills you can take with you.

But it's also important that you learn how to protect your values. Here in the West we have a problem with a society that doesn't even give lip service to Buddhist values. It's almost as if we were aliens surrounded by people who don't understand us. If you go to Thailand, though, it's not that much different. People do give lip service to Buddhism, but in the society in general you don't have to scratch very deep to find a lot of misunderstanding—and a lot of values running contrary to what the Buddha taught. Really being serious about the practice is a counter-cultural thing everywhere. So you have to be very careful about what you pick up from your surroundings.

This is where restraint of the senses comes in. With the things you look at, the things you listen to, you have to ask yourself: "Why am I looking? Why am I listening? What am I getting out of the looking and the listening?" Of course, in some cases, things are right in your face, especially when there are people around you. But, again, you want to protect your sense of your own personal space. When you're not feeling invaded by the other people, it's a lot easier to step back and look at their attitudes as being their attitudes, and not necessarily something you have to pick up.

Stepping outside of the culture is a necessary part of the practice—especially when you look at our culture: There are a lot of neuroses, and a lot of other problems that you really do want to step outside of, that you don't want to be part of. So, as Ajaan Fuang used to counsel his students, "Your body may be in the world, but your mind doesn't have to be in the world. Your mind can stay with the Dhamma." Although it may be disconcerting at first to have that sense of separation, you find that it is for the sake of your own true health, your own true happiness.

Just as when you're meditating and a thought comes up and you say: "Well, is that so? Is that so?" you can ask the same thing of other people. Of course you don't ask it right out loud, you just pose the question in your mind—"To what extent is that so?" If you can't do that with other people's ideas, there's no way you can do it with your own. If you start accepting their ideas, it's going to be very hard not to accept your own ideas, your own attitudes, or the things you've internalized.

Ajaan Lee's advice for any insight that comes up in the meditation is to ask yourself, "To what extent is the opposite true?" That way you can step back from the thoughts, and the freedom that comes from that really impresses itself on your mind. You can practice the same attitude toward the

things that other people insist on. There may be some truth to what they say, but it's good to step back and gauge: How far does that truth go? In the Buddha's words, some truths are categorical. They're true across the board for everybody. But other truths are personal. They may be true for that one particular person, but they don't have to be true for you. What we're looking for here, as we practice, is that insight into things that is true across the board. The Buddha's teaching on skillfulness, his explanation of how suffering is caused and how it can be put to an end: These things are constant. They don't depend on the culture; they don't depend on the time or place.

So you start by holding to that. You try to keep your precepts pure, keep your views straight—in other words, understanding what causes suffering, and what doesn't. That right there offers you a lot of protection.

These three principles—sense restraint, right view, and pure precepts—fall under a set of five that the Buddha taught to new monks. Another principle in the set is keeping control over your mouth, trying to have restraint in what you say. Do your best to not get entangled. When you can keep restraint over your mouth, it's a lot easier to keep restraint over the mind.

The fifth quality is trying to find some seclusion, having time for yourself, so that you're not constantly surrounded by other people and their attitudes. That way, you can step out both physically and mentally from the general current of thought. At home, this may mean having a little corner where, when you go in that corner, all you do is meditate. Or it can mean actually going out and finding some time in nature to help clean out the mind, and to gain some perspective on the issues of the day, the issues at work, the issues at home, the issues in the family.

This is a universal antidote to our general immersion in society. We've all noticed that when you get out and are alone in nature, you start thinking about a lot of the issues back home, a lot of the issues at work, and they seem so small and petty. The Buddha talks about this: As you get out in nature, the perception of wilderness overcomes you—that you're alone in nature—and nature has nothing at all to do with what's in society. All of the perceptions and concepts of people back home, all the issues back home, seem small and far away. It's good to have the mind in that space as often as possible so that it can really turn around and look at itself—so that you can

realize the extent to which you're still carrying something around is right there in the mind. If you're busy with other people's issues, it's very hard to look at your own. You want to see that you really are causing yourself unnecessary suffering, there's an opportunity to see it happen, and there's an alternative: You don't have to do that.

This way, you get some perspective on which thoughts coming into the mind are useful and which ones are actually defilements. When you're in society, it's a very easy to get defensive about your opinions, your ideas, especially when they're under attack. Your ideas seem to be the only thing you can hold onto to maintain a sense of your own independence, a sense of not just giving in to other people. This is why, in the context of society, it's very hard to give up your ideas. It's as if you're giving in to somebody else. Whereas if you can step outside those concerns, that context, it's easier to be more objective—when you see an idea come up, and it's not an issue of whether it's your idea verses somebody else's idea, but simply this idea appearing in the mind.

Then you can actually watch what it's doing to the mind. Where is it adding a burden? Where is it adding stress? You can look at this again and again and again, until finally you're tired of the whole thing—not tired of the meditation: tired of these ideas that weigh down the mind. You realize that you don't want to keep feeding on them.

The word nibbida, disenchantment, is also the word for feeling revulsion toward a certain kind of food. You've been eating it for a long time, and then you suddenly realize, "This is garbage. This is something I don't want to feed on ever again." The Buddha makes a comparison with an enticing beverage: It tastes good, it looks good, and you keep wanting to drink it until suddenly you realize there's poison in the beverage. Then no matter how good it tastes or how good it looks, the knowledge that it's poisonous is enough to develop a sense of nibbida. Well, that's the same attitude you want to take toward your defilements: your greed, your aversion, your delusion. You've had enough.

This is another reason why it's good to have the breath as your defense against other people. Because, so many times, we keep our defilements up as armor to protect ourselves, or we think we protect ourselves, from others; staking out our place with our anger, staking out our place with an aggressive attitude. So we're unwilling to let it go because we think without

that attitude, we'd be defenseless. But now that you've got other defenses—the shield of your energy, the shield of your concentration—you're actually better equipped. Because no matter how good the armor of your defilements can be, there will always be a spear that can pierce the armor and penetrate a weak spot. But with a shield of concentration, a shield of the breath, things go right through and don't touch anything inside.

This is another reason why it's good to have the breath as your defense, because nobody can even see what it is. They don't know where to deal with it. It's just that you know inside you've got this protection.

This is why it's useful, even when you're at home, to try to find some quiet time just to be by yourself, so that the mind can take care of itself, watch itself without the issues of other people getting in the way.

So when you leave the monastery, remember that you're taking skills with you, skills necessary for life—i.e., the life of the mind's goodness, the life of the mind's awareness, the life of its potential for freedom. Don't forget to pack those skills with you when you go.

New Feeding Habits for the Mind

August, 2001

The juxtaposition of those two chants just now—the one that says, "subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation," and the other that starts out, "May I be happy, may all living beings be happy": That's the human predicament. We're sitting here in this body that's going to age, grow ill, and die someday, and yet we want to be happy. And we want to be happy in a way that doesn't cause suffering to anybody else, either. This—if the mind is constantly weighed down with aging, illness, death, and separation—is very difficult.

Most cruel actions come from people who are suffering. When you see a cruel action, it's usually coming from the person's feeling weak, feeling threatened, at his wits' end. Acts of kindness and compassion come from a feeling of well-being in the mind.

So when we look for true well-being, true happiness, it's not a selfish desire. But still, we're stuck with this problem: the body is going to age, grow ill, and die. Our mental faculties are going to go away. And how are we going to handle that situation when it comes? How are we handling it as it's encroaching upon us now?

That's what the fifth contemplation in the chant is about: "I'm the owner of my actions, heir to my actions." It's through our actions that we can make a difference.

The Buddha says that there are four kinds of action: skillful actions in the worldly sense, unskillful actions, a mixture of the two, and then the action that leads to an end of action—in other words, the action that leads you outside of the cycle of the world altogether.

So this is what we're working on here as we meditate: First, learning what it means to act. As the Buddha said, action is intention. So we practice meditation to get to know our intentions. One way to do that is to set up an intention in the mind and see what happens as you try to keep it going. Focus your intention on the breath. Say to yourself, "I'm going to stay with

the breath for the hour: that's all I'm going to notice, that's all I'm going to worry about." See how long you can make the intention last.

If your powers of mindfulness and alertness are strong, you can maintain that intention. If they're still weak, and the intention gets lost, you just set the intention up again. Set it up again and again and again. Don't give in, because if you can't stick with this little intention, how are you going to deal with the larger issues in life? If you don't have the mindfulness and alertness to maintain this much, how will they be able to help you through more difficult situations?

We're training these mental faculties in the same way that you train the body, strengthen the body. If you want to be strong, you don't go out and buy a new strong body from somebody else. You take your weak body and you exercise it. Exercise is what makes it strong. In the same way, you exercise these qualities of mind that can help make your intentions stick. You begin to see that as you maintain these intentions with skill, they really do make a difference in the mind because they give it a new foundation for its well-being. You don't have to depend on the body; you don't have to depend on people outside you. You've got a skill within the mind that's purely mental, using the body as a foundation, developing mental skills that will make a difference.

Once the mind has this sense of center, it brings a stability and steadiness to your life. You're not constantly subjected to buffeting from forces outside. No matter which direction the winds blow from, you can stay steady and still, and watch to see what's going on around you. Your ability to stay still like this is what enables you to see. If you're streaking through life, all you see is the blur on either side. Only when you stop and stand still can you see not only what's going on around you but also what's going on inside, those very subtle movements of the mind that can cause you to get attached to things that are going to change on you.

You begin to realize that the mind's habit of latching on to the body is not necessarily something it has to do. Its habit of latching on to feelings, or perceptions, or thought constructs, awareness of this or that: it doesn't have to latch on to those things. It latches on because it doesn't yet have the strength to stand alone, doesn't have any better place to go. It's dependent on these things, wants to feed on these things, to see what kind of

nourishment they give. Sometimes they give a little good nourishment, but for the most part they're junk food.

Now, as the Buddha says, suffering is the mind's habit of feeding like this. So we try to give the mind something better to feed on: a sense of well-being inside, the sense of well-being that comes as you learn to adjust the breath, settle down into the breath, make friends with the breath, learn to savor the breath the same way you would good food or good music.

What does this flow of energy feel like as it comes through the body? What kind of flow would the body like to feel right now? Do you know? Can you tell? Most of us live within the body for how many years, and we don't know what kind of breathing the body would like to do, what would feel good for the body to do right now. So take some time to explore, to get acquainted with it.

As you develop this inner sense of well-being and stability, you find that the mind would much rather feed here than outside. There may still be some stress, some slight sense of burdensomeness in having to feed here, but at least it's better than what the mind tended to feed on before. You begin to look back upon thoughts of lust, thoughts of anger, thoughts of greed, and you begin to wonder: "Why did I ever want to feed on those? What kind of nourishment did they provide?" Nothing really solid, nothing really substantial, nothing really healthful at all.

Once you learn how to let go of those things, you learn to stop feeding on things bad for the mind. When you're not weighing the mind down in that way, when you're not giving it junk food to clog up its arteries, there's a greater sense of lightness, health, and well-being. When the mind feels light and healthy like this, it's much easier for you to feel compassionate, not only for yourself but also for people around you. Ultimately you get to the point where the mind is so well fed, so strong, that it doesn't have to feed anymore at all. That's when the mind is totally free.

It's like when you go out camping. One of the big problems in going camping is that you have to carry your food everywhere you go. That puts a limit on how far you can go, how many days you can go out on a particular trip, because you've got to keep your food stores low enough so that you can carry them but not so low that you're confined to one- or two-day trips. Think of how much you could wander around if you didn't have to feed. I've often felt I'd like to wander off into the canyons at Zion and disappear—but I

can't, because the body has to feed. And as they say, you can't eat the scenery.

But when you put the mind in a position where it doesn't have to feed, it's really free. It's not weighed down by anything, not confined by anything. This is what the Buddha meant by nibbana. The word nibbana comes from a fire's going out. Back in those days they had the conception that fire was trapped by its fuel because it had to keep clinging to the fuel to get its sustenance. But when it went out, it let go of the fuel and was released. It was no longer confined. You couldn't even describe it as existing, non-existing, both, or neither. It was that free.

So that's what the Buddha was talking about with nibbana: The mind doesn't feed anymore. When it doesn't feed, it's not confined to its food source, doesn't have to carry its food source around, isn't limited by where there's food and where there's not. When you look back, you realize that the steps you were following along the practice were precisely that fourth kind of kamma: the kamma that leads beyond kamma, to the end of action, to the end of having to feed.

If you're observing the precepts, practicing concentration, and developing discernment into what the mind needs to feed on, what it doesn't need to feed on, what kind of feeding is good for it, what kind of feeding is bad for it, and then feed it in such a way that ultimately it gets so strong that it doesn't have to feed any more, it can let go. At that point, an entirely new dimension opens up in the mind that you couldn't have even conceived before.

That's ultimately where the practice leads. It takes this mind—which is feeding on the body, feeding on feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness—and tells it that there are better things to feed on. If you feed on these things, you're going to be really sorry because your food source is going to run out on you very quickly. It's going to keep changing—and with that sense of uncertainty and instability in life, how can the mind find any sense of well-being? At the same time, it turns out that a lot of that food is junk food, which keeps you weak and unhealthy. So you teach the mind better ways to feed through the practice until the path finally issues in a point where the mind is at total equilibrium, doesn't need to feed anymore, and you can let go.

So that's where we're headed. As the Buddha said, the only things he teaches are suffering or stress and then the end of suffering. That may seem like a narrow ideal. What about helping humankind and all the other great issues? He said to straighten out your own mind first and when that's straightened out, when you're really free, the type of help you can then give to people is the best kind of help. There's no hidden feeding agenda, no hidden need to feed on the sense of pride that comes from being a very helpful or very important person, which can actually spoil the help, spoil the compassion. You're operating from a sense of compassion that comes from total freedom, total independence—which is ultimately the only compassion you can really trust.

The Skill of Restraint

December 20, 2007

People often ask how to bring the practice into daily life. The answer is relatively simple. It's one many people don't like to hear, but it is simple: restraint. There are basically two kinds of restraint. There's restraint in what you do, and restraint in how you look and listen and smell and taste and feel and think about things—in other words, restraint in what goes out, and restraint in what comes in. Both kinds of restraint require a good amount of skill.

Take restraint of the senses: There's a skill to looking, a skill to listening. You want to look at things in such a way that you're not exciting greed, anger, or delusion. You want to listen to things in such a way that you don't excite greed, anger, or delusion. And so on down through the senses. This is a skill. You want to be able to do it in such a way that you don't starve yourself of pleasures to the point where you break down and suddenly find yourself in front of an open refrigerator, scarfing down a gallon of ice cream. You need to know how to keep the mind well fed even as you're starving your defilements. In mastering this skill, it helps to have concentration as a foundation. The texts often give restraint of the senses as a prerequisite for concentration, but as is so often the case in the Buddha's teachings, the two qualities actually help each other along.

Try to notice when you look at something: Does your attention go flowing out? Do you lose your sense of the body? If you do, it's a sign that your looking isn't all that skillful. You want to be able to stay in the body as you look, as you listen, to maintain your sense of the breath energy throughout the body. If you can't, that's a sign either that you're looking for the purpose of forgetting the body—in other words, you're looking for the purpose of greed, anger, or delusion—or you're simply careless, and the sight, the sound, the smell, or the taste, whatever, happened to catch you off guard.

That's how most people look and listen and smell and taste and feel and think about things. They forget their inner center and suddenly find

themselves centered outside, trying to get some pleasure from grabbing on to a sight or a sound and then elaborating on it—either to make it more attractive or to make it seem more meaningful than it actually is. If the mind is in a mood for a little bit of anger, you focus on the things that would provoke the anger and then you can elaborate on it, proliferate as much as you like.

Those are where our skills tend to be. We're great at proliferating. But if you think of input at the senses as a kind of food for the mind—which is how the Buddha sees it—you have to ask yourself: Are you preparing good food for the mind or junk food? Or poisonous food? That's the kind of cooking we're used to. We think we're cooking up great meals, but they can make us sick. So you've got to learn a new way to cook for the mind.

The Buddha counts sensory input among the four foods for consciousness. It actually includes three of the four: contact at the senses; intentions at the senses—why you're looking at these things, listening to these things to begin with; and then consciousness of the act of sensing. These three aspects of sensory input are what the mind is feeding on all the time.

The basic skill in learning new ways to cook this food is to focus on the breath and get the mind centered inside. You're actually changing the level of the mind when it's inside the body in this way. Instead of being on the sensual level, it's suddenly on the level of form, which is a higher level than the level of sensual desire. Even though there may be the desire to stay here at the level of form, it's a skillful desire because it raises the level of the mind. You're not so dependent on things outside for your happiness, so you're in a position where you can look at sensual pleasures from above.

At the same time, you're learning how to make the most of what you've already got. As Ajaan Lee says, it's like learning how to grow food on your own property rather than invading the property of others to plant crops on their land. Learn how to develop a sense of ease, a sense of fullness and refreshment right here in the body. Make that your food. Try to preserve and protect that level of the mind. That's the skill in how you look at things and listen to things: maintaining this sense of the center in the body, a sense of ease, refreshment, and fullness no matter what happens outside. That puts the mind on a higher plane—and in a much better position.

When you handle restraint of the senses in this way, you're not depriving the mind. You're simply learning how to give the mind better food, to nourish it in a healthier way, a way that's totally blameless. Sometimes you hear people talking about the dangers of getting attached to jhana, as if it were a huge monster waiting to ambush you on the side of the path. But the dangers of jhana are relatively minor. The dangers of being stuck on the sensual level, though, are huge. When your happiness is dependent on sensory pleasures being a certain way, it can lead to all sorts of unskillful behavior as you try to keep on feeding the mind the kind of sights, sounds, etc., it likes. This is why we see so much killing and stealing, illicit sex, lying, getting drunk around us in the world. All the precepts get broken because of people's attachment to the pleasures of the senses. You don't see anybody killing or stealing because of attachment to jhana.

So even though this is an attachment, it's a better one. When your happiness is not dependent on things outside being a certain way, people outside have less power over you. We see this so much these days. All they have to do is wave the red flag: "There's danger out there; there are terrorists out there; they can harm us. We've got to do all kinds of evil things to stop them." That's what they tell us. If the mind's only nourishment is in things outside, you're going to be swayed by those arguments. But when you can step back, and say, "No, I've got a source of pleasure, a source of happiness inside, that people outside can't touch," then you're much less likely to be led astray.

In this way, your ability to find nourishment inside is protection for the mind. The pleasures of the world outside hold a lot less poison because you're not trying to feed on them anymore. They're still there, but you can learn how to handle them more skillfully, use them more skillfully, as you try to make the mind even stronger.

For instance, there will be times in your meditation when things aren't going as well as you'd like. In cases like that, it can be helpful to go outside and look at the beauty of nature around you—the clouds, the sunset, the moon and the stars at night—to help clear and refresh your mind. There are passages in the Canon where Maha Kassapa, who was one of the strictest and sternest of the Buddha's disciples, talks about the beauties of nature. The constant refrain in his verses is of how the hills, the mountains bathed in rain, and the jungle refresh him. Some of the first wilderness poetry in the

world is in the Pali Canon—an appreciation of the beauties of not just nature but of wild nature. That sort of appreciation is part of the skill in learning how to gladden the mind.

What this comes down to is that, as the Buddha said, even something as simple as looking or listening can be developed as a skill. You look and listen while at the same time trying to maintain your sense of being centered inside. This is one of the best measurements for how much greed, anger, or delusion is lurking in the mind and pushing it around. If you catch the mind flowing out to a particular object, there you are: You've found a defilement.

Many of us in the West don't like the word "defilement." We deny that there's anything defiled in our minds and yet, when the mind is clouded by desire, narrowed by desire, that's precisely what the Buddha means. Your sense of inner awareness gets obscured and narrowed as your attention goes flowing out. According to Ajaan Lee, the tendency to flow out to things is the meaning of asava: effluent or fermentation. That kind of looking and listening—the kind where your mind flows out to the object—is unskillful looking, unskillful listening. If you're skillful, you can stay inside while you see and hear. When you catch the mind in the course of flowing out, you've learned an important lesson: that there's still greed, anger, and delusion in the mind. If you want to look for it, here it is. Only when you see it can you actually do something about it. You begin to sense the danger of falling for those currents. You develop the motivation to want to do something about it, so that you don't have to get pushed around like this any more. You find ways of stopping the flow at its source.

This is where you find that being inside the form of the body really is a higher level of food for the mind, a higher level of happiness, a better place to be. You want to do everything you can to stay here, regardless of what happens outside. When a wildfire swoops down the mountainside at you, you want to stay right where you are. You may want to move the body, of course, but you want your center to stay right here inside the body. When disappointments come in life, you still want to stay here and not let the disappointments from outside make inroads into the mind. When a cold wave comes, a heat wave comes, you want to be able to find your refreshment, your sense of well-being, here in the body.

This is why restraint of the senses is not deprivation. It's actually a way of feeding the mind better food, giving it a higher level of pleasure. But you

can't have everything. If you go for the more dangerous food, you miss out on the better food. You've got to make the choice: health food or junk food. In that sense, restraint is a form a deprivation. But it's actually a trade. You're getting something better in return.

As you go through the day, keep asking yourself that question: "What am I feeding on right now? What is it saying about the mind? What am I learning about the mind by watching the way I feed?" In this way, the simple act of looking or listening is part of the practice. If you do it skillfully, it's nourishment for the practice. It keeps it going.

The path doesn't provide refreshment for the mind only while you sit here with your eyes closed, or while you're doing walking meditation. When you know how to exercise restraint, you can gain refreshment throughout the day. There's a continuity in the practice. When you sit down and close your eyes, you're right here. You don't have to spend the whole hour pulling the mind in like a cat on a leash, because it's already here. You've already been developing the wisdom and discernment that protect the mind, keeping it here. You don't have to cook them up fresh every time you sit down and meditate.

So think of everything you do throughout the day as a skill, including the way you exercise restraint. Sometimes that means not looking at or listening to the things you don't know how to deal with yet—like a beginning boxer who knows enough not to take on a world champion. But you won't have to go through life with blinders on all the time. You can teach yourself how to look at things that used to set off your anger or set off your lust, but you do it in a new way, a way in which they don't set you off. If there's something you feel greed for, look at the unattractive side of getting: what would be involved in trying to gain that thing and keep it. If there's lust, think of the unattractive side of the human body: your own and that of everyone around you. As Ajaan Lee would say, look at things with both eyes, not just one.

Furthermore, stay centered right here while you're doing your looking so that you

can check and see if, as you're looking and listening, you're really staying separate from the defilement. Or are you sneaking it in, are you flowing along with it? This is why restraint is a good check on the mind, in two senses of the word check: Not only to stop it, but also to keep tabs on what's actually going on. If the defilements seem really quiet while you sit in

meditation, well, here's your chance to test them. Do they flow out during the rest of the day?

Restraint is what provides continuity to the practice. If you do it skillfully, your looking and listening all become part of the practice. They can keep you on the path all day long.

Right Speech, Inside & Out

August 12, 2011

In the Buddha's description of the path, after he establishes the principles of right view and right resolve, he goes into right speech. Right view focuses you on the issue of suffering and what can be done to put an end to suffering. Right resolve deals with the ways that you make up your mind that you're going to follow the path: You'll try to put aside your sensual obsessions, put aside ill will, put aside thoughts of harmfulness. Then you've got to focus on your speech, as this is a primary place where you're going to be training the mind—because you're dealing both with their external chatter and your internal chatter.

In a lot of ways, it's easier to do a lot of harm with your mouth than it is with your body. With a few words you can give people wrong views, make them feel miserable, break people apart, and waste people's time. A waste of time is a real shame. As the Buddha said, you can die at any time. Suppose you spent your last day dealing in frivolous chatter, and then the Big One came—the earthquake that's going to knock everything down—and your last thoughts will be what a total waste that last day was.

So you want to make sure that when you open your mouth, you're actually following the path. You're keeping your mouth on the path. The Buddha's own test for whether something was worth saying or not was, one, is it true? If it's not true, forget about it. Two, if it's true, is it beneficial? Does this really help somebody? In other words, do you know what you're talking about? And do you know that this actually will be helpful for them?

There was one time when I was talking with another young monk in Thailand, and sounding forth on something. This was very early on in my career. I was saying, "I think it's like this, I think it's like that." Ajaan Fuang happened to be walking past, and he said, "Well if all you do is think about it, you don't really know, so why are you talking about it? Why are you cluttering up other people's minds with your opinions?" So try to restrict your speech to what you know is true, and you know really will benefit the other person.

Even then, you have to ask a third question, which is: Is this the right time and place for this? Because sometimes things can be true and beneficial, but if it's the wrong time, the full benefits won't come. If the person's in a wrong mood, or you've got the wrong group of people, there are all kinds of things you've got to watch out for when you say something. Especially when you're a community of people practicing together, you want to make sure your speech is actually helping, not only your path, but also theirs. Because sometimes things may be true and beneficial, but it's not the right time. Ajaan Lee once said that if the people you're talking to are not ready to hear what you have to say, even if it's great Dhamma, if it has nothing to do with what their actual practice is right here and now, then it's idle chatter. It's talk about the practice over there someplace else. It's not really focused on what people need to do right now.

You have to be careful about that. We're here to protect one another's practice, to encourage one another's practice. It helps to have people sitting together here in the room. Sometimes when you're sitting alone, it's very easy to say, "Well, that's enough for now," and then you get up well before the time you'd originally determined. But if everybody's here for the hour, we're all here for the whole hour. There's a certain power that comes when we are practicing together, so you don't want to dissipate that power during the rest of the day. Each time you open your mouth, you're disturbing someone else's quiet. You want to make sure that when you do disturb their quiet, it's for a good purpose. Otherwise, we become enemies of one another's practice.

So keep the Buddha's three tests in mind each time you open your mouth. Ajaan Fuang's test was always: Is this necessary? If it's not, you don't have to bother. We're afraid that if we're quiet, people will think bad things about us. But that's not always the case. I know a lot of people from my past who were very quiet, and I thought that because they were quiet, they were very observant and very circumspect. But then they opened their mouths and destroyed that impression. Particularly here, we're in a community where people are trying to practice. When you're quiet, people will understand: This person's trying to be quiet. It's not that you're stuck up or unfriendly. You're here to meditate. If you feel pressure from other people to be friendly and chatty, well, remember that that's not what you're here for. You're here to work on your own mind.

A similar principle applies to internal chatter. You find the mind chatting away about all kinds of things: attitudes about yourself, attitudes about the practice. You particularly have to be wary of attitudes that tear you down. We were talking earlier today about low self-esteem and how sometimes that's the mind's way of sabotaging itself. If you lower your expectations, you feel that less is going to be demanded of you; you don't have to put out so much effort. It's basically an excuse for laziness. We may have picked up some ideas from other people, people who have looked down on us for one reason or another. But you have to ask yourself, why do you let yourself internalize that? Because you know some people who—even though the whole society dumps on them, or one large segment of society dumps on them—don't let it get to them. They make it part of their determination: They're not going to allow that attitude to infect their own. But then there are other people who just allow other people's low opinion of them to weigh them down.

So it's not inevitable that if people are looking down on you you're going to have low self-esteem. If there's part of you that's willing to take on that low opinion for one reason or another, you have to look into why. This is particularly important for you as a meditator, because it's in meditation that you begin to realize more and more the choices you have. You're learning to step back from the different voices in your mind, and ask yourself: "Do I really believe that? Do I really believe that now? Maybe I believed that sometime in the past, but do I have to believe it now?" Well, no. This applies especially to the attitudes that make you feel you can't do the practice, or you're not up to it.

Or you allow yourself to get down. You have a bad day in the meditation, and all of a sudden that becomes the whole story of your life as a meditator. Well, stop and think. You've had good meditations and you've had bad meditations. It's a normal part of training the mind. The mind is a complex phenomenon. If we were to draw a chart of its progress, I don't know anybody whose progress would be just up, up, up, up, up, all the time. It has its peaks and its troughs. Part of your stamina is learning how to deal with the troughs so that you don't get discouraged. At the same time, you don't want to become heedless when things are peaking. Because you know the nature of a peak: From there, you just go down. How do you turn that peak

into a plateau, or a gentle rise that goes still further up? You don't do it by getting complacent.

So you have to look at the kind of chatter going on in your mind, to figure out when to come down hard on yourself and when to be more consoling. When something comes up in the mind, a good test is always: To what extent is the opposite true? And when would the fact of the opposite sometimes being true be a useful thing to think about? After all, there are very few things that are true 100% across the board.

As the Buddha said, there are only two things he saw as categorical truths. One was the distinction between what is skillful and unskillful behavior—that skillful behavior should be developed and unskillful behavior abandoned—and the other was the four noble truths. The truths about yourself as a meditator don't fall into those categories. In other words, the question of whether you're a good meditator or a bad meditator is never true across the board. You can be sitting here and creating all kinds of narratives about where you are in the chart of your progress, measuring it in different ways. In some, it might be part of a nice rise as you head into the future. In others, it might be a horrible chasm facing you. Or you might be down in the dumps. It depends on which things you're going to focus on, and how you stitch them together to make a narrative. Learn how to make narratives that are actually helpful, that keep you heedful but don't let you get discouraged in the practice.

These principles of internal chatter are important, both while you're here at the monastery and when you leave. Because here, at least, there's a very strong set of values aimed at the practice. As you go someplace else, you'll find that the values are very different. You have to be careful about what you internalize, what attitudes you pick up. Remind yourself: You do have the choice. And be very careful not to take unskillful voices outside and make them your own voices inside. Try to keep that internal conversation true and beneficial and timely. If any members of the committee are out of order, let them know. Because this business of verbal fabrication inside the mind, as Ajaan Lee pointed out, is the most important issue on the path. It can do the most damage, but it can also be the most helpful. It can be helpful in the sense that it reminds you of what right view is, and in that way it's an essential part of mindfulness. As you're working on your concentration, it

helps you to notice when things are going off course, and you can direct them back.

But be careful. Something that's useful like this, if you don't make sure that it stays skillful, can also be very harmful. So do your best to sort out this internal chatter, and keep it focused on issues that are really important and really beneficial to your quest for happiness. This is how right speech translates into the other factors of the path that follow on it. You talk yourself into doing the right things: You talk yourself into maintaining right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. It's an important function of the mind. You know what's right, you know what the path is, but there will be lots of different parts of the mind that will fight or pull off in other directions. The factor of right internal speech is what keeps everybody in line.

A Meditator is a Good Friend to Have

April 16, 2012

Take some long deep in-and-out breaths. Have the sense that the breath is sweeping through your whole body, from the top of the head down to the tips of your toes. Try to notice where there are any patterns of tension in the body. Allow them to relax and let the breath sweep right through them. Then allow the breath to find a rhythm that feels really comfortable. You can experiment for a while, to see what kind of breathing feels most refreshing. Sometimes shorter breathing is what the body needs, sometimes longer, sometimes deeper, more shallow, heavier or lighter, faster or slower. Try to keep on top of whatever the body needs. As for any other thoughts that may come into your awareness, just let them go.

We're trying to sensitize ourselves to what's going on in the body and to how the breath can help. It's an area of our awareness that we tend to ignore because we're too interested with things outside to notice what we're doing inside.

When they talk about things being unconscious or subconscious, it's not that there's a basement in the mind where whatever happens has to be unconscious and in the dark. It's simply that we're not paying attention. Thoughts go flitting through the mind and then leave an imprint on the body. Or events in the body can have an impact on the mind. All too often, if we're not aware of this, the tension builds up and results in a sense of being burdened, being weighed down. The Buddha's essential insight is that much of that being burdened or weighed down is totally unnecessary. In fact, none of it is necessary. There may be stress in the body, but it doesn't need to have an impact on the mind.

As the Buddha says, when people are in physical pain, it's as if they were shot by an arrow. Then they shoot themselves again with another arrow: the sense of being burdened or victimized by the pain. That image has always struck me as a little too weak. We don't shoot ourselves with just one extra arrow. We shoot ourselves with many more arrows, a whole quiver of arrows. Of course, the act of shooting ourselves with those arrows makes

the original pain even worse, to say nothing of all the pain of the extra arrows. No wonder we feel burdened all the time. No wonder we feel victimized, or at the very least that something is wrong.

What we do when we meditate is that, instead of looking for the answer outside, we look for the answer inside. "What are we doing here that's adding all that unnecessary pain?" This is not a selfish question. If you can stop adding that extra pain to your own mind, you're less burdened and you're less of a burden on others. You can actually start paying attention to how other people are getting along. This part of the practice tends to be under-appreciated, but meditators are really good friends to have, precisely because they've learned how not to weigh themselves down all the time. When they're not weighed down, they can actually be of more help to others.

When pain comes along, whether it's physical or mental, they realize that they don't have to take it personally. There's a passage in the Canon where the monks are talking, and one of them, Ven. Sariputta, says, "You know, I was thinking today: Is there anything in the world whose change would cause me grief? I couldn't think of anything at all." Ven. Ananda, another one of the monks, says, "But what if something happened to the Buddha? Wouldn't that cause you grief?" Sariputta replies, "No, I'd reflect on the fact that he was a great human being and had been very helpful to many, and it's a sad thing he couldn't live on. But I wouldn't feel any personal grief around that." Ananda says, "That's a sign that your conceit has gone"—"conceit" here meaning not necessarily pride or arrogance, but more a sense of who you are and how you take things personally. If you can be in a difficult situation and not take the loss or change personally, you're actually more helpful to others than you would be otherwise.

I've seen many cases where people are crying over someone who is about to die. A lot of the crying has to do with how much they're going to miss that person, how much grief they feel. That's not all that helpful to the person who's dying. The best gift you can give to someone else who is in trouble is that you've taken care of your habit of personalizing the grief, of focusing on how much you're going to feel the loss, how much you're going to feel deprived. Once you've gotten past those issues, you can look more carefully: What does this person need? How can I be of help?

We were talking today about helping someone who's dying. The first thing the Buddha said is to try to make sure that the person isn't worried.

There are two cases in the Canon. One is of a woman whose husband seems to be on his deathbed. So she goes and tells him, "Don't worry about me. I'll be able to take care of myself when you're gone. Don't worry about my financial situation. Don't worry about my turning away from the Dhamma. In fact, I'll be going to the monastery even more now. So put your mind at rest."

It turns out that the husband doesn't die, at least not then. He recovers and he goes to tell the Buddha what his wife told him. The Buddha replies, "Do you realize how fortunate you are that you have such a wise wife who has your best interest in mind?"

There's a similar case where one of the Buddha's cousins, Mahanama, learns that the Buddha's going to go away at the end of the rains retreat. So he asks the Buddha what to do, what to say, if anybody is dying while he's gone. "What should I tell him?" The Buddha says, "The first thing to tell him is to not worry about his family: 'Regardless of the situation, the fact that you're worried now isn't going to help anybody. So drop those thoughts from your mind.'" But the Buddha doesn't just leave the person there. He then tells Mahanama to ask, "Are you worried also about the sensual pleasures you're going to be leaving?" If the person says Yes, then Mahanama should say, "Try to set your mind on higher levels of being where the sensual pleasures are more refined." In this way, he should keep advising the person to take his thoughts all the way through even higher and higher levels, until he gets to the Brahma world, where the pleasure is the same pleasure we gain from a really concentrated mind. If the person can keep that up, then the Buddha says to tell him to let go even of that type of pleasure. That, too, is impermanent. The sense of identity you would build around that is impermanent, too. Let go of it. If the person can follow you all that way, then he or she can gain total release from all kinds of suffering. That's a huge gift you can give to someone who's dying.

It's not always the case that the person dying can follow you that far. It generally would require someone who's got a good meditative background, but you never know. Still, your first duty always is to try to pull that person away from any worries and then advise them to set their minds on something good. It could be the good things they've done in the past—which doesn't mean the good times they've had, because that gets people sentimental and that can get them really upset.

Instead, have them think about the times they were generous, the times they were virtuous. If they have any meditative background, try to remind them of that. Give them something good to hold on to. This means that you're not putting your own sense of loss in the way of really helping them.

This is why a meditator can be a really good friend: someone who really is concerned with your welfare, who is not only thinking of his or her own sense of loss, or sense of pain, and who is not being burdened by those extra arrows.

In my own case, many of the people in my family wondered what good it was to have a monk in the family. But then one year my father went through a severe depression. I was in Thailand and only after several months was I able to make my way back home. Within a couple of weeks, after talking to my father and letting him talk, he was out of the depression. This was after my brothers had been trying for months to help him. That's when one of my brothers said, "You know, it really is good to have a Buddhist monk in the family." Of course, you don't have to be a monk: Anyone who has trained his or her own mind is a good person to have in the family, a good person to have as a friend.

So as you're meditating here remind yourselves: It's not just for us that we're doing this. We're doing this so we can also be a help to others. The less we burden ourselves with our own sufferings, the stronger we'll be. If we're not carrying huge loads around, then when we find somebody else carrying a heavy load, we have free hands to help them put their burden down. In that way, your training in good friendship can continue. As the Buddha says, you try to look for good friends, people you can rely on—not only so that you can gain their help, but also so that you can learn from them what it means to be a good friend. In that way you can pass on the gift.

The Ivory Intersection

December 10, 2010

My mother was an author. When I was young, she did most of her writing in the kitchen. She set her typewriter on a table in the middle of the room and she'd sit there, typing away. We'd come running in with all our childhood emergencies. She'd stop, take care of us, and then go back to her writing. Someone once asked her how she was able to get her writing done. She replied that she didn't have an ivory tower; she had an ivory intersection. The middle of the house, the place where everybody was coming past: That's where she did her writing.

It's a good image for our meditation. We're in the middle of an intersection here and we have to learn how to create the ivory part, the part where we can have a space for ourselves to do the work that's really important. The world comes at us from all angles with all kinds of pressing issues, and we often mistake something that's pressing for something that's important. As a result, the really important things don't get done.

Sometimes you think, "If I could only take care of everything else, if everything else got settled and tied down, tied up, then I could find some time for the mind." But if you wait until that point, you'll never get around to the mind, because there's always going to be something that comes pressing on you. So you have to learn how to develop some mental seclusion: your ability to pull yourself away from your pressing responsibilities, and make the mind your top priority.

As you've probably found, when you come here, even when there's physical seclusion, thoughts about work, thoughts about family—what, in Thai, they call "108 different issues"—all come rushing in. Even if we were to put up seven fortress walls around the monastery, those thoughts could still come in and invade your mind, invade your meditation—even more so when you're in the midst of your life out there, where there's no physical seclusion at all.

So you've got to learn how to develop this mental seclusion, the ability to say No to those things. That involves having the right attitude: remembering

that there are only so many things you can be responsible for; you have limited resources, limited energy, limited time on this Earth. You've probably seen people who were strong willed, physically strong, mentally strong, who reach a point when they get so old, and their strength is no longer there, that they become like withered flowers that fade away. That's a shock. What happened to the strength? It seemed so strong at the time. For many, many years, these people seemed strong, yet it's just not there anymore. You have to realize that that could happen to you, too, very easily.

So we only have so much time. You have to ask yourself, "When your physical strength goes, and when strength of the brain goes, what kind of strength of mind will you have left? Where will your refuge be at that point?" You've got to develop that refuge now. That's your top priority. The Buddha's image is not of an intersection, but of an island surrounded by a flood. You can't wait for the flood to go down, but you can develop your island, and develop a solid foundation there.

This is why we work with the body in and of itself; feelings, mind states, mental qualities, in and of themselves: looking at these things as events in the present moment, learning how to be ardent about it. In other words, not just being here, but also learning how to develop what's skillful—and then trying to fend off the floodwaters. If you do have to get out and row your boat around in the flood, you realize you can't stay out in the flood forever. You've got to come back here. But at least you have a place to come back to. This is where your strength lies. This is where nourishment lies.

However much you may want to be responsible for other people in your family or your work, you have only so much strength. And if you don't look after your own strength, you're also letting them down. So the voice that says, "If you don't keep thinking about these things and worrying about these things, you're irresponsible": You've got to come back and say, "Look, looking after the mind is your number one responsibility." Because if the mind starts breaking down, then how are you going to take care of other people? It's like a tool you need in your occupation. You've got to take really good care of your tools. If you let them get broken or dull, then you can't do your work. So the time it takes to stop and sharpen your knives, to keep your other tools clean and in good order, is all time well spent. Even though you may not be working on your job at that point, still this is an important preparation so that you can do your job well.

So remember, the mind always has to take top priority. This means that you have to have the right attitude and the right place to keep the mind, so it really does get some strength here in the present moment. If you simply force it to be here, it's going to start rebelling. And it's not going to get the nourishment it could get.

One of the sad things in the way Dhamma is often taught—and this is not just here in America, sometimes you see it in Asia as well—is the downgrading of concentration, saying that concentration is a side path, a distraction, that it takes too long and is too hard for people who live busy lives. That wasn't how the Buddha taught at all. If you lead a busy life, you need to develop concentration as the primary element of the path, because it's nourishment for the mind, food for the mind. It's what enables all the other factors to become right. You need other factors to make your concentration right, too, but concentration was the first element in the path that the Buddha himself discovered. The well-being, the sense of rapture and fullness that feed the mind as you get it to settle down and give it a really good place to settle: These are the qualities that enable you to stay on the path. Ajaan Fuang compared the sense of ease and fullness of the breath, the ease and fullness of the rapture, to the lubricant for your meditation. Without it, he said, the motor of your practice is going to seize up.

So you have to work with the breath, play with the breath, experiment. This gives you nourishment and keeps you interested in the present moment as well. Otherwise, the present becomes a very dull place to be, and when it's dull, the mind is not going to stay. It's going to look for its opportunity to slip back to other things that seem more pressing or at least more interesting. But here, you're working with the breath energy, which is directly related to the health of your body. And the sense of ease and well-being that you can create are directly related to the health of the mind. That should be enough to make it interesting.

You've got to learn how to develop your sense of priorities, with this the number one priority. You can't wait for everything else to get settled down before you work on this. This has to come first. If there are other issues you have to think about, remind yourself that the mind, when it's been well fed and well rested, is in a much better position to deal with those things than if you just take everything on all at once. So if you've got something that really is important, that you've got to deal with, remind yourself at the end of the

meditation you can give yourself five minutes, 10 minutes, whatever, and that's when you'll think about the issue. You might pose the issue at the beginning of the meditation, remind yourself that this is something important you'll have to think about, but now, for the rest of the hour, you're not going to think about it at all, until the time comes at the end of the meditation. Then you give yourself some time to let those thoughts come up and see what the mind has to say when it's in a better state to look at those issues.

At the same time, you have to learn how to take at least some fragment of the nourishment of the breath with you as you go through the day. We were talking about this earlier. Try to notice where in the body tension tends to tighten up first. It might be in your chest, in your stomach, in the middle of the head, your neck, your shoulders. Then, when you know your spot, try to keep in touch with it as you go through the day. Just monitor the quality of energy there, and when you sense it tightening up, take a few seconds to allow it to relax. Learn how to develop that release response, the relaxation response, and how to be quick at it. Give yourself little meditation breaks as you go through the day. After all, you take snacks for the body. This is a snack for the mind, time to stop and just be by yourself. Drop all your other responsibilities.

After all, you can't take the whole world on your shoulders. Of course, we may not be taking the whole world but we tend to take a healthy chunk. Sometimes it's a good exercise in humility to realize that there's only so much you can do, and only so much you know. One of the first steps in wisdom is realizing there's a lot you don't know. As the Buddha said, when you recognize you're foolish about things, you're at least to that extent wise. We're here to overcome ignorance. If we don't admit that we have ignorance, we're not going to be able to overcome it. Ignorance isn't just not-knowing. It's thinking you know things when you don't.

Another part of developing wisdom is realizing that you can only take on so many responsibilities. You've got to realize: What is really my responsibility? If you're taking on other things that are not really your responsibility, learn how to let them go.

This is an issue that applies to daily life and goes deeper and deeper into the practice: the whole issue of which kind of suffering you can actually cure, which kind of suffering you can actually gain release from, and which

kinds you can't. There's the suffering and stress from the three characteristics, just the fact that things change: You can't stop that. But then there's the suffering that comes from your craving and clinging, and that's something you are responsible for—and something you can do something about.

These basic principles about everyday wisdom get applied deeper and deeper into the practice, so don't overlook them. As you learn how to get a sense of what you're responsible for and what you can handle in day-to-day life, you also get some very important lessons that go deeper into releasing the mind from even the subtler levels of stress and suffering it can create.

So the meditation here is your ivory intersection. Things are going to come around and come through. Little kids are going to come crying in because their older brothers have bullied them, or they've fallen down and hurt themselves. You take care of it and then get back to your breath. Because it's only in the midst of things that you can actually work on the mind. If you wait until everything is settled, you're going to be dead. Because that's what life is: in the midst of things. So try to find a place, your own island in the midst of the flood, keeping track of the breath in and of itself, the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That's the traditional formula. The world is still there, it's just that you're learning how to put aside your greed and distress around the issues of the world. That's what keeps you on your island. And it's an island you can take with you when you go.

Caring Without Clinging

January 23, 2009

Several years back, about a year after I returned to America, I was teaching meditation to a group up in Orange County and I gave my first interviews. One of the people in the retreat started her interview out by saying, "Buddhism: It's all about love isn't it?" I was taken aback. I said, "Well, no, it's all about freedom." She was taken aback.

We come from a culture in which love is very highly valued—not only as a social virtue, but also as a religious one. So it's a little shocking when we come to another tradition where it's not valued so highly.

The Buddha talks about dispassion, disenchantment, equanimity—and to us it sounds cold. But everything in the Buddha's teachings is put in the service of freedom. As the Buddha once said, all of his teachings have a single taste: the taste of release. This means that all of his teachings on goodwill on the one hand, and equanimity, dispassion, disenchantment on the other, are all put in the service of freedom—realizing, on the one hand, that we have a certain freedom of choice in our actions right now, and that if we learn how to exercise that freedom skillfully, we can come to an ultimate freedom, total freedom, with no limits on the mind whatsoever.

It's good to keep that in mind as we think about the Buddha's teachings on equanimity and dispassion. He's not teaching people simply to be uncaring. He's asking us to look: In what ways are we slaves to the idea of love, or the enjoyment of the emotion of love—or the enjoyment of happiness, or the enjoyment of sorrow? We do enjoy these things, the ups and downs, although when we take the downs, we often console ourselves by saying, "Well, if we didn't have the downs, we wouldn't have the ups." Which is true. But the Buddha calls our values into question: Might there be something better than those ups? After all, what are we getting out of them?

When he calls for equanimity as a skill in the practice, is he saying that we should have no emotions at all? Or is he talking about our relationship to happiness and sadness, as they come? The answer is the second alternative. There are things that we like, things that we don't like. Even the Buddha:

There were things he liked and things he didn't like. But he learned how to keep his mind from being overwhelmed by them. When people would come to study with him, some of them would listen to him but they wouldn't follow through with his teaching, and they didn't get the results. Of course, he didn't like that. But he said he established mindfulness so that his mind was not overtaken by his sense of dissatisfaction. When the students did follow his teachings, and did gain awakening, it's not that he didn't like that. He did like it, but he didn't allow the sense of satisfaction to overcome his mind. What this means is that the mind has to learn how to look at these things and not get sucked into them.

This is another one of those issues around becoming. In fact, the Pali word for emotion, bhāva, is like bhava. Bhava means "becoming." You make it bhāva with a long a, and it becomes "emotion." We like to get into the emotion. We like to taste it. But then we become slaves to it. We get addicted to the taste. We want to taste it again and again. We like getting wrapped up in it, without realizing that we've just allowed ourselves to become enslaved to these things and have placed limitations on ourselves.

So it's not that the Buddha asks us not to have feelings, but he tells us to learn how to be free in the midst of these emotions. Learn how to observe them, step back from them, and don't get deluded by them. It's easy to get swayed by something when we're happy. We pick up all sorts of deluded ideas from it. What you want to be able to do is learn how to observe.

This is where his analysis of equanimity is important. He says there's equanimity that's based on multiplicity and equanimity based on singleness. The equanimity based on multiplicity is simply learning how to keep yourself from getting pleased or displeased by things that you see or smell or taste or touch, listen to, whatever. But it requires an act of the will and it doesn't have a foundation, which is why it's hard to maintain.

Equanimity based on singleness, however, comes from getting the mind into a good solid state of concentration. As we chanted just now, getting to the point where the breath gets more and more refined, the mind settles in, your sense of awareness fills the body, the sense of breath energy throughout the body feels connected and open, so there's a less and less need for the in-and-out breath, until you finally get to the point where the in-and-out breath goes still. That's purity of equanimity and mindfulness. That's your foundation for equanimity based on singleness.

It gives you a foundation from which you can look on things. There's another interesting word-play in Pali. There's upekkha, which is equanimity, and there's apekkha, which means "looking on." The two are very similar. You look at things from your state of equanimity: When they arise, you see them arise; when they pass, you see them pass away; and you realize you don't have to get caught up in them. They can happen—it's not like you're trying to prevent them from happening—but you want to make sure you don't get caught up in the delusion that comes along with these things: the idea that when you're happy, everything in the world is going to go fine. Actually, you know there are problems in the world. Or the delusion that when you're sad, everything in the world is miserable. Well, you know that things can often work out. You can't let your emotions cloud your vision and get you to make thoughtless generalities. You realize that each emotion is a state, and from within the state it's going to have a particular point of view. But you can't trust that point of view.

Things are a lot more trustworthy when the mind is really solid. After all, it was when the Buddha was in the fourth jhana that he was able to gain all the knowledges of his awakening. Not that the fact that he was in the fourth jhana guaranteed the truth of everything he saw. He saw his previous lifetimes, he saw beings arising and passing away: That wasn't yet his awakening, because, after all, those visions could've been wrong. But then he saw the truths of suffering or stress arising, passing away, and seeing why it arose and why it passed away, and what he could do to bring it to total cessation. Seeing that from a really still and equanimous mind: That's when he really knew. And that was the knowledge—seeing things in terms of the four noble truths—that allowed him to find something that was beyond equanimity and beyond the four noble truths. His knowledge of the total ending of suffering was the guarantee. But if he hadn't been able to bring his mind to that equanimity to begin with, he wouldn't have been able to open up to that other dimension.

So when the Buddha teaches equanimity, dispassion, disenchantment, he's not simply teaching us to have a stiff upper lip or to try not to feel anything at all. That's not what the purpose is. The purpose is to free the mind. Disenchantment, nibbida, can also be translated as distaste, disgust, revulsion; it relates to the fact that we're constantly feeding on things. We have to get to a point where we realize we don't want to feed on them

anymore. The dispassion means that you don't allow the mind to be colored by these things, so that your vision isn't obscured.

All this is for the purpose of freedom, a true well-being that doesn't have to depend on feeding, that doesn't have to depend on the ups and downs of emotions. Being in that state doesn't mean that you're uncaring, it simply means that you don't need to feed anymore. The compassion and the goodwill that can come from that state are very different from the compassion and goodwill that come from someone who needs to feed. When you need to feed, compassion has a clinging aspect; goodwill has a clinging aspect. When there's clinging, there's a fear of allowing the object of the clinging to have its freedom.

This is what's revolutionary about the Buddha's ideas on goodwill and compassion. If they come from a heart that's totally free, then they're genuine goodwill and genuine compassion. This is very different from the goodwill and compassion that we're used to, where there's the element of clinging and holding on—enslavement. So it's important that we not mistake the warmth for what it's not. The warmth we often feel sometimes has this element of feeding, which is not what we want. As for the compassion that comes from someone who's not feeding on us, don't think of that as cold. It's liberating.

When we can look at things from this perspective, then it's a lot easier to understand what the Buddha is getting at. We can sort out the various emotions in the mind, but it does require the skill of learning to get the mind to be centered and still, really centered, really stilled—feeding first on its concentration, on that equanimity based on singleness, then finally getting the mind to the place where doesn't need to feed at all. That really is liberating. As Ajaan Lee says, you're not only liberating your own mind, but you're also giving freedom to everything else around you. That's why equanimity, dispassion, disenchantment, are things that we really want to work for. They're not to be feared.

Protecting Your Space

May 12, 2011

Think of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. Try to get a rhythm of breath that feels really good. You can experiment with longer breathing. In fact, it's good to start out with a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths. If that feels good, you keep it up. If not, you can change. Shorter, deeper, shallower, heavier, lighter, faster, slower: There are lots of different ways of breathing. Sometimes you need to breathe in a way that gives you more energy. Other times you need to breath in a way that allows you to relax.

When you've got a rhythm that feels good, start exploring how the process of breathing feels in different parts of the body, because the energy in your nerves is very closely related to the energy of the in-and-out breath. The energy in your bloodstream, all those little muscles that lie in your blood vessels, the flow of energy through them, is related to your breath. So you want to focus in, using your magnifying glass to clearly see the different parts of the body to see how the breath feels.

See if there are any locations where you tend to tense things up or tighten up, where the energy doesn't flow very well, and learn how to breath in a way that allows them to stay relaxed and open, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. Because eventually you're going to be going back to the larger perspective again: having the whole body as your frame of reference. But you still want to be able to stay centered in one spot and think of your awareness spreading out from there. Which means that before you focus down on that one spot, you want to clean up things in the different parts of the body so that you don't have to keep running back and forth.

You're creating your own space. You're filling your own space. This is important. If you can't feel at ease in your own body, there's no place in the world you're going to feel at home. This is your territory. This is your position of strength. Nobody else has the right to be here as much as you do.

We see this in the animal world sometimes. A larger dog is chasing a smaller dog, and suddenly the smaller dog gets into its territory; it can turn around and chase the bigger dog away. It knows its territory, and the other dog knows its territory. When you're in your territory, you're safe.

The Buddha gives this as an analogy: the quail who leaves its field. Quails are safe in a newly plowed field because there are lots of stones they can hide behind. There was once a quail who left its field, and a hawk swooped down and got it. As it's carrying the quail off, the quail laments, "Ah, just my bad luck and lack of merit. If I'd stayed in my territory today, this hawk would have been no match for me." The hawk gets a little peeved and says, "Okay, I'll let you go. Go to the field. But even if you go there, you won't escape me." So the quail goes down to the field, stands on a stone, and taunts the hawk. The hawk comes diving down. But as soon as the quail sees that the hawk is coming full speed, it hides behind the stone, and the hawk shatters its breast right there on the stone.

So if you're in your territory, no matter how small you may be in comparison to the rest of the world, you've got your space. This is your place, your safe place. As the texts say—to say nothing about the rest of the world—even Mara can't get you there if you're staying in your safe place.

Learn how to fully inhabit this. Don't let anybody else in. Because we do have a tendency to pick up other people's energy and let it invade our territory. Sometimes you talk with another person whose energy is frenetic, and not only while you're there with the person do you feel that frenetic energy, but even after the person's gone you're still carrying some of it around. You don't want that. You need to create your own space, not only filling your own inner space like this, but also creating your environment around you.

This goes beyond just the technique of filling the body with your awareness to looking at the other ways in which you create your environment as you go through the day.

The Buddha lists five things that create a good environment for a meditator. They're in a sutta where he's talking about five qualities that a young monk should develop, but they apply to laypeople as well. Anybody who's meditating needs to keep these things in mind. As to what kind of environment you're creating, we tend to think of the environment outside as pushing in on us, forcing things on us, as something we can't change. But

you've got to have the conviction that your actions are creating the majority of the things you sense in your environment. So you've got to look at your actions. What kind of environment are you creating for yourself as a meditator?

The first step in creating a good environment is following the precepts. For the monks, of course, this means following all the precepts the Buddha laid out for them. For laypeople, it means the five and the eight precepts: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no intoxicants. Those are the five. For the eight, you change precept number three from no illicit sex, to no sex, period; and then you add no eating after noon or before dawn, no ornamenting the body or going to shows or listening to music, and, finally, no sleeping on luxurious beds or sitting on luxurious seats.

The five precepts are especially important in creating your environment. Just take the precept on lying, which the Buddha seems to treat as the most important of the five: If you're very casual about how true your statements might be, you're basically selling yourself short, and you tend to attract people who are also careless about that kind of thing, too. If your words don't have much value, people won't give them much value, and you generally create a bad environment for yourself. If you're used to lying, telling yourself, "Well, this lie doesn't matter, that lie doesn't matter," how is your mind going to tell itself the truth? It's going to start getting casual about what it says to itself, about what's going on, overestimating either your attainments or the obstacles facing you. You get so that you can't really trust your own powers of observation. After all, lying involves hiding, and it's not just a matter of hiding things from other people: You end up hiding things from yourself. That creates a bad environment to meditate in. You've got to look to your precepts, make sure you keep your precepts clean. You find that that really does improve the environment in which you're meditating. It improves the environment in which you're practicing as a whole.

The second factor is restraint of the senses. Notice why you're looking at things, why you're listening to things. What's your motivation? Sometimes we think of restraint of the senses as meaning that you just don't look, or you don't listen at all, but that's not the case. It's just a matter of noticing—when you see that focusing on certain things gives more energy to your greed or more energy to your anger—that you learn not to focus on those things. You focus on other things. Or you look at the same thing in a

different way. Say there's a picture that gives rise to lust. Think about the actual body that's giving rise to your lust, and you'll realize that there are parts of the body that you wouldn't like to look at, wouldn't even want to be near, and they're all part and parcel of the body. All our bodies are equal this way.

So restraint is a matter of knowing what to look for and how to look for it.

It also means looking at your own motivation. Because often it's not the case that your mind is perfectly innocent and suddenly you run across something that gives rise to lust or to anger. You're actually out looking for it. This is why they have talk radio. People want to get worked up, so they tune into whatever. People switch on the Internet to feed their defilements. Their defilements are already hungry, looking for something to latch on to. You've got to watch for that tendency, because if you give into it, it really plays havoc with your meditation.

So be careful about what you're looking at, what you're listening to, why you're looking, why you're listening, all the way down through the senses. The less you clutter up your mind in this way, the less you give rein to your defilements in this way, then the easier it's going to be to get the mind to settle down. Because a large part of getting the mind to settle down is exercising some restraint over it. But if you loosen all restraint during the day, then it's hard to clamp down again when you meditate.

This is also where it's important to have the breath as your foundation. The Buddha talks about having mindfulness immersed in the body, when it fills the body, as a basis for sense restraint. He compares it to a post. Suppose you had six animals, with each one on the leash, and you tied the leashes all together into one knot. Now, if the leashes weren't tied to a post, then the animals would pull one another in all different directions. If there were a crocodile, it would go down into the river; a monkey would want to go up into a tree; a hyena would want to go into the charnel ground to feed on some corpses. In other words, all the different animals would be pulling in different directions. It would depend on which animal happened to be strongest at any one time, and that's where they'd all go, they'd all get dragged along. If the crocodile is stronger, then the monkey and the hyena and everybody else get dragged down into the river and often drown.

However, if you have a post and tie all the leashes to a post, and if the post is a really firm, then no matter how hard the animals pull, they've got to stay right there next to the post.

That's the image for filling your body with mindfulness, filling your body with your awareness, and keeping it there, making that your foundation from which you look or listen or taste or whatever you're doing. You want to have this sense of the energy in the body as your post. That way, you've got some continuity between your formal meditations; you've got the body right here, you're centered right here, so when the time comes to sit down the next time, you're already right here. It doesn't involve a lot of pulling and pushing, untangling leashes that have gotten caught up, or pulling dead animals out of the river. Everything is all right here.

The third factor in creating your environment is knowing moderation in speaking. It's good to be a person of few words—if they're well-chosen. At the very least, be careful. Every time you open up your mouth, ask yourself: Why am I speaking? Like that sign we have in the guesthouse: W A I T, Why Am I Talking? You always want to know what your intention is, because talking that has no specific intention counts as idle chatter. If you fill your days up with idle chatter, then your mind is going to be filled with idle chatter. It's going to be hard to get it to settle down, to focus on something really useful, like staying with the breath.

So be very clear that you don't want to misrepresent the truth; you don't want to speak in a way that divides people, just for the satisfaction of seeing them break apart; you don't want to speak in a way that's meant mainly to hurt other people's feelings; you always want to know what your intention is. Because the way you speak is probably the major factor that influences your environment. It creates the environment for the mind.

So be very careful about what comes out of your mouth. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, if you can't control your mouth, then there's no way you're going to be able to control your mind. So start here, make sure that your words are precise, accurate, to the point, helpful to other people, helpful to yourself. Those three tests that the Buddha has: Is it truthful? Is it beneficial? Is this the right time and place? You want your speech to pass all three of those tests.

The fourth factor in shaping your environment is finding seclusion. It's good to have a place where you stop every day and have quiet time for

yourself. I don't know how many people, both here and in Thailand, who say, "Well, all I have to do is just be very mindful of what I'm doing throughout the day, and that's what the practice is really all about." Your mind needs to have time to itself, where it's not taking on other outside activities, other outside responsibilities. Otherwise, all it knows is the mind in the reaction to things outside. What you really want is to have time every day to get in touch with how the mind is reacting to itself. What conversations are going on in the mind?

Look for some physical seclusion, along with what the Buddha calls mental seclusion—dropping your thoughts of the future, dropping your thoughts of the past, and just staying right here, with a minimum amount of internal chatter, just enough to get the mind to settle down.

The sense of seclusion is also important in the way you go through the day, as you interact with other people. As we were saying today, it's often good to be able to step back just a little bit, so that you're not totally sucked into the society around you. Have the attitude of being an anthropologist, studying, "Oh, this is the way human beings are this time in history, at this spot, in this society." Be aware of the times when their values begin to creep into you. Because it is subtle, the influence that people have on one another: the values you pick up, your idea of what's important, and what's not important.

You can see this in the media. The kinds of questions that get raised are not the really important questions. They're diversionary. The big question in life, which never gets addressed in the media, is: Why is it that everyone wants happiness, but people are doing so many things that create suffering? In particular, why are you doing things that create suffering? That's the question you always want to keep foremost, and that's usually a question that most people don't ask. You require some space around your mind, so that you can keep that question uppermost in your mind.

This relates to the fifth factor that influences your environment, which is making sure that your views are right. In other words, you do have conviction that your actions matter, that they do make a difference. Your experience of the present moment is something that's shaped by things you've done in the past, but also things you're doing right now. And you do have freedom of choice.

The Buddha never tried to prove that freedom, but he did say that if you don't believe that, there's no reason to practice. If you can't take that as a working hypothesis, you'll get nowhere. The bewilderment that comes from pain and suffering just stays bewildered. He says if you don't believe you have the power to make these decisions, you're left without protection. Because this is your protection right now: the fact that you can change the way you focus on things, you can change the way you interpret things, you can change the questions that you regard as important. There are potentials for pain, there are potentials for pleasure right now, and you have the freedom to choose which ones you're going to cultivate and amplify. You want to make the most of that opportunity.

I remember a meditator who was following a meditation method in which he was advised not to do anything at all—just know what was there and just be with whatever came up. He had been a meditator for several years, and nothing bad had ever really come up. But then suddenly, on a very long retreat, some really scary stuff started coming up in his mind. He had been indoctrinated enough to believe that he should just be with whatever came up, but it was making him paranoid. No matter how much the teachers told him to step back, relax, don't push things so hard, he felt that they were now lying to him. He had been taught that you just have to be with whatever comes up, and not do anything, and that, somehow, is going to give rise to insight.

Well, that's not the case at all. That's leaving you unprotected. Your basic assumption has to be that you are shaping your experience out of the raw materials from your past actions, and you can learn how to do that skillfully. That's the beginning of right view: that you can do that, that you can develop those skills.

Belief in kamma is what grows into an understanding of the four noble truths: There is suffering, and it's clinging. There is a cause, and the cause is there in the mind, something the mind is doing, and something you can do something about. There are factors in the mind that you can convert into the path; you want to develop those so that you can realize the end of suffering. This is possible. The real work is in here. The environment nowadays tells us that anything of interest is out there, something someone else is doing some other place. That's a value you have to resist. In other

words, keep very careful watch on what you're doing, because it really is important.

These are the ways in which we create our environment. So don't let yourself be a passive victim of unhealthy influences from outside. You want to create your own space here, both inhabiting the body and having a very clear sense of what you want to protect in the mind. And just as an electric current creates a magnetic field around it, by focusing on your actions in this way you create a protective cocoon around yourself that shelters your practice, protects your practice, gives it an environment in which it can grow.

So try to keep these five points in mind: observing the precepts, restraint for the senses, moderation in talking, finding seclusion, both physical and mental, and making sure that your views are right. Because these are the factors that shape your environment more than anything else.

An Anthropologist from Mars

May 28, 2008

Years back, I taught a course on the forest tradition at a Buddhist study center. The first evening of the course, after making some general remarks, I gave the people attending the course their first assignment: to go back to their rooms and clean them up, arranging everything very neatly. That's where a lot of the training in the forest begins. Wherever you go, you try to be neat. What this teaches you, in a very concrete way, is to be intent on what you do, to try to pare down your activities so that the few activities you do, you do carefully, heedfully, with circumspection. This is a good habit to develop as a meditator regardless of whether you're a monk or a layperson.

As the Buddha said, this is one of the things to be done by one who is skilled in aims: be a person of few activities. This doesn't mean being lazy. It means deciding what's really important in life and focusing your energies there. As for the things that fritter away your time, just drop them. That simplifies life a lot. It's the old-fashioned way of simplifying things. The modern ways of simplifying things, of course, is to buy a magazine that tells you what to buy to simplify your life. But the Buddha's way is the old way: to see which activities you're engaged in that get the mind stirred up, and learn how to abandon them. And "activities" here means everything from the way you look at things, the way you listen to things, to the actual responsibilities you take on.

The bottom line for a meditator, when doing any of these things, is to ask yourself: How does this affect the state of your mind? This is very different from the bottom line in the rest of the world. There, if you're a layperson, you have to pay attention to how much money and how many people you need to survive in physical comfort. But when you start practicing, the question is: How much do you really need for mental comfort, for the mind to find the happiness that comes from peace and tranquility? If you're engaged in work that takes up a lot of your time and energy, then even though it may provide a comfortable income, it's really not conducive to the practice. You want to find a job that you like, that you enjoy

doing, so that it's not pure drudgery, but that also gives you time to practice, energy to practice, so your time isn't frittered away, frittered away.

This last weekend I was with an old friend from college, and it was sad to see how much of his life was taken up by his job. Like so many people, his question was: How much longer did he have to work so that he could finally afford to retire and then really do what he wanted to do? You always wonder: Will the person survive to retirement? That's a scary thought. You save up and save up, but then you don't live to enjoy what you've saved. In the meantime, your time is wasted—maybe not totally wasted, but you don't get as much out of it as you could have.

What this means is that, as a meditator, you don't just take the meditation and squeeze it into the cracks of your life as it is. You've got to ask yourself: How can I live my life in such a way that it will be more conducive to the practice, to give more space to the meditation?—so that the meditation, the state of your mind, can become the bottom line.

This requires that you take a skeptical look at the things that society at large views as important. As the Buddha said, basically what the world has to offer is just eight things: material gain, material loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, and pain. That's it. That's what the world has to offer. And as you notice, those things come in pairs. You don't get the good side without the bad side. They trade places back and forth. If you make your happiness depend on things like this, you're setting yourself up for a fall. Yet we let these things—especially issues of status and praise—really pull us in.

So you've got to learn how to look at them with a jaundiced eye. Think about the dangers that come from having a high status, having the respect of other people, because in many cases their respect is really not worth that much. They respect you because they want to get something out of you. You have to work on seeing through that. Approach society at large as an anthropologist would. Think of yourself as coming down from the planet Mars as an anthropologist who wants to see how these strange earthlings think, how they behave, so that they don't snare you with their values—and you don't snare yourself with their values.

If you can maintain this attitude, you can cut through a lot of garbage. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, nobody paid you to be born; you're not here dependent on anybody else's approval. You're here because you want to find

true happiness. Whether other people approve or not, that's their business. When you think in this way, you can start making choices that really are in your true best interest without getting snagged on whether other people approve, whether it looks strange in their eyes, or you think it might look strange in their eyes. When you can cut through these eight ways of the world, you find that a lot of the obstacles to practice get cleared out of the way.

It helps to see both gain and loss as having good and bad sides. When there's material loss, you find out who your true friends are. When you lose status, as Ajaan Lee says, if they call you a dog, well, dogs don't have any laws. They can go wherever they like and do whatever they want to do. When people criticize you, it gives you a chance to reflect on yourself: Is what they say true? If it is, you've learned something important about yourself. If it's not, then you've learned something important about them. As for pain, we all know that the Buddha said that pain, suffering, stress—however you translate dukkha—is a noble truth. There's a lot to be learned there.

So try to face the ways of the world with equanimity and not let yourself get sucked into the narratives or systems of values that people use to tie you in, to keep you going along with their view of the world. After all, they want to make sure that everyone around them shares the same values so that they can feel comfortable, so they don't have to face the huge abyss inside their hearts, the huge emptiness, the huge void, when those values are exposed for what they are. Their way of avoiding that is to rest assured that everybody else believes the way they do, thinks the way they do, and acts the way they do. But you're not performing them any service by playing along. They may not like it if you don't play along, but they have to learn to accept that. Maybe they can learn from it. If they don't learn from it, well, you can't force them to learn. But you can't allow their attitudes to run your life.

This is a huge area: your reaction to other people's praise and criticism, the respect or lack of respect they give you. It's so important that, as the Buddha said, one of the signs of a person who's reached nibbana is that he or she doesn't reverberate in response to criticism. He compares the awakened mind to a gong that's been cracked. You hit the gong and there's no sound. Or there may be little plunk, but it doesn't reverberate, doesn't continue ringing. The ability to train your mind so that it doesn't keep

ringing with the words of other people: That's a really essential part of the practice.

A lot of societies have rites of passage where a person approaching adulthood is sent out to be alone. For many people it's the first time in their lives they've ever really been by themselves. It gives them a chance to gain a sense of who they are and what they really think about things, what they feel inspired to do with their lives. In our society we lack that. It may be why most people never really grow up. So try to make the meditation your rite of passage: the time when you're alone and can sort things out, from a mature position, as to what you really believe in and what you don't.

The first year when I went back to Thailand to ordain, I was sorting through a lot of attitudes and ideas I had picked up from who-knows-where all through the years of my life. I was far enough away and had enough time for myself so that I could really look at these things and decide what I really believed in, what I didn't. Meditation gives you a good place to stand so you can watch these things without getting caught up in them. When you're meditating, all thoughts are suspect until they show they can help you with staying with the breath or understanding what's going on in the mind. Only then do you admit them into the meditation. But everything else gets called into question. This is a useful attitude to maintain even when you're not meditating. The press of society makes it difficult, but if you're really serious about your true happiness, you've got to press back, to develop the ability to question things that you've believed for a long time. If you simply stay with other people who share similar attitudes, that tends to reinforce old ideas, reinforce old values. You've got to be doubly careful about that.

When you decide that you don't agree with society's values, learn to do it in a way that's not confrontational. After all, you're going your own way. You're not a permanent earthling. You're not here to settle down for good. You're here primarily to practice, to train your mind. If, having trained your mind, you can help other people, that's fine. But if you can't, make sure that at least you get your own mind in shape. As Ajaan Suwat used to say, whether we get other people to come here doesn't matter, as long as we get ourselves: i.e., as long as we train ourselves and get results from the training. That's what matters.

So learn to foster a little space of separation between you and the values of society at large. Ajaan Mun was often criticized for not following the old

Thai monastic customs, old Laotian monastic customs. People said, "Why aren't you doing it the Thai way? Why aren't you doing it the Lao way? What is it with these dhutanga practices you're following? It's just not the way other people do things." And he replied, "Well, the ways the Thais do things, the ways the Laos do things, are all the customs of people with defilements." This point applies to the customs of every society in the world, Asian or not. He was more interested in the customs of the noble ones, to delight in developing, to delight in abandoning: i.e., to delight in developing skillful qualities and to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities.

That attitude right there flies right in the face of most of human society. But if you can hold to it, it gives you space, it gives you the proper orientation so that, as you go through life and learn to be more self-reliant in your meditation, you really do have your own compass. And you can make sure that it always points due North.

Renunciation

March 16, 2005

There go the helicopters again. That's what happens when you hold on, hold on, hold on: You've got to fight. The resources of the world are limited. The desires of the human heart can be pretty unlimited. As the Buddha once said, even if it rained gold coins, it wouldn't be enough to satisfy even one person's desires for sensual pleasures.

This is why renunciation is so important. When you can let go of those desires, you find that you're really free.

Someone called tonight with a question. Do arahants have free will? It seemed like one of those non-starters. Arahants are free, period. As the verse says, like the path of birds through space, their path can't be traced. They're free because they don't have to feed. This doesn't mean that they've starved themselves. They've actually attained something that doesn't need feeding. That's the basis of their happiness. It's a gift, not only to themselves, but also to the world around them. They don't have to feed on this, that, or the other thing. You don't have to worry that they're going to make their next meal out of you. And for each of us here, this can be our gift to the world too. Even if we don't get that far in the practice, learning how to let go of unnecessary pleasures makes us lighter and less of a burden on the world.

The way we do this is first by learning how to feed inside, by giving ourselves good mental states as a basis for our happiness. It's interesting that when the Buddha divides right resolve into two levels—the mundane level and the transcendent level—all the factors are connected. The mundane level is resolving on renunciation, on no ill will, and on harmlessness. All these three go together, as different facets of the same thing. When you renounce your fascination with sensual plans, you're less harmful. When you let go, it's easier not to feel ill will for people because you don't have to fight them over things. You don't have to jealous of them when they take what you wanted, so you're not harming yourself.

Then, on the transcendent level, right resolve is, essentially, the thinking and evaluating that bring the mind to jhāna: good, strong states of

concentration. That's your food inside. Some of the passages talk about feeding on rapture as food for the mind. There's another sutta that compares the different factors of the path to different parts of a fortress, and the jhanas, good strong levels of concentration: Those are the stores of food. When you're well fed inside like this, there's no need to go out feeding on other people or taking anything away from them.

What this means is that your food source, the source for your happiness, is a lot more certain: You're the one who creates it, you're the one who can maintain it, you're the one responsible for it. It's in trustworthy hands. At the same time, you can be less of a burden on other people because you have this internal food source.

That way, giving up things outside is not starving yourself. Actually, you find that you're more and more full all the time, with qualities of mindfulness and concentration: These are things that you can carry around with you wherever you go. They're not like meditation cushions: You don't have to stick them under the platform here when you leave, you don't have to carry them to your next sit. So, in this way, you're finding a more solid type of happiness. At the same time, the rest of the beings in the world have one less person to fight them for what they want. It gives them a sense of security as well.

All that time I was living with Ajaan Fuang, I had a very strong sense that he was a person without any greed. He could live very simply just sitting alone in his room or sitting up on the mountain. He was perfectly content. As a result, I really felt I could trust him. I never had the feeling he was going to make a meal out of me. After he passed away, they appointed someone else as acting abbot. I found it intolerable. This particular person had a lot of greed. Having been used to living with someone who didn't have any greed, I found it very difficult to make the adjustment. I got a very strong sense of what a gift it is to the world to not be a greedy person, not having to feed on other people emotionally, to be content with little.

That comes from this practice we're doing right here, right now. It's a real gift not only to ourselves, but to the world.

So keep that in mind as you're practicing, when you find yourself running up against something you've got to give up, either because of the Vinaya or because of the way we live here. Remember that it's a trade, not a deprivation. If everything were really easy here, you'd start getting lazy, and

your work on your inner resources would start falling slack. But having to give up this, that, and the other thing directs you inside. It keeps reminding you that the real food is inside. The sense of ease, the sense of pleasure, the sense of rapture, refreshment, is a much more satisfying, gratifying food for the mind. Once you've developed it, you can feed on it to your heart's content.

If you haven't gotten there yet, just keep reminding yourself that this is where it's all leading, this practice of renunciation. Because, after all, it is a better form of happiness. Not better in the sense of having somebody standing over you with a ruler saying you'd better do this, but better because once you gain this form of happiness and you look at the other pleasures you have in the world, you really see that this is a lot more gratifying, something you can carry around with you all the time—if you work on it, if you perfect it.

It does require effort, but then again there are points in the practice where things click and actually hit a stage from which you can't fall back, because you've seen something deeper. That really rearranges your relationship to everything else. It puts you in a much better position. Your food sources are no longer so vulnerable. You never find yourself thrown into a position where you really have to fight other people for what you want and they want. Because what you've got is something they can't touch.

This is why right resolve grows out of right view. When you see that the causes of suffering are inside, and that the potential for putting an end to suffering is inside as well, you want to focus all your efforts here and not let them get scattered out.

So as you're working on right concentration, remember that this is how we fulfill the factors of right resolve. It's the greater happiness that comes from letting go of a lesser happiness. It's a simple proposition, but it takes work. Because our mind is so used to having clamoring desires—when to eat this, take that—it takes training to focus on the desire that points you the right direction, the desire to renounce sensual pleasures, the desire to renounce ill will, to let go of harmfulness. Even when you don't attain states of jhana, having these resolves in mind and practicing the precepts, a sense of well-being comes. But then it goes even deeper as you get into good states of concentration. That gives you the food to keep you on the path: your provisions for the journey.

The Four Jhanas

January 30, 2009

As you sit here with your eyes closed, where do you feel the breathing? You may feel it in lots of places in the body, because the breath isn't just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It's an energy flow. It's part of the breath element that fills the entire body. Your sense of the body sitting here, the whole body from the head down to the feet, has a breath aspect. Part of that breath is the in-and-out breath, and another part is simply the energy flowing in the nerves, in the blood vessels, out to the pores of the skin. It's all breath.

So as you breathe in and out, you have the right to sense it anywhere at all. You can focus either on the spot where the breath seems most prominent, or on the spot where it simply seems most natural to focus. Some people find it easiest to focus on the head, others find it easier to focus on the chest, the neck, or the shoulders. So focus anywhere you'd like.

Allow the spot where you're focusing to have a certain amount of freedom. In other words, don't clamp down on it. Sometimes you may try to define things sharply: "This is where the in-breath begins, this is where the out-breath begins; this is where the in-breath ends, this is where the out-breath ends." But doing that places unnecessary restrictions on your breathing. Given that the whole body is a body of breath energy, breath energy doesn't come with clear lines or sharp demarcations. When you breathe in, the incoming energy simply melds with the old energy. It doesn't fight it, doesn't have to be pushed against anything. It just suffuses and energizes what's already there. There's no clear line of demarcation. When the in-breath reaches a point where you feel you've had enough incoming energy, the breath goes out.

Try not to impose too many strict, preconceived notions on the breath. Just watch how the process feels and hold that perception in mind: that the

whole body is a field of breath energy and the in-breath is simply charging up the breath energy already there. Then when things feel too charged, you allow the breath to go out. When it's going to start coming in again, that's its business. You're just there to watch it. To use the Thai word Ajaan Fuang would use, "prakhawng"—hover around it, look after it, make sure it feels good. You can pose some questions in the mind: "What kind of breathing would feel better right now? What kind of breathing would feel best? Which part of the body needs more breath energy?" See how the body responds. Just hover around the breath like this.

The hovering around: That's directed thought and evaluation. As long as your hovering can stay with the breath and doesn't hover off to other places, you've got the third factor for first jhana, which is singleness of preoccupation: the singleness here meaning both that it's the one topic you're interested in and that, as you work with it, it becomes more and more the one thing filling the whole body, your whole range of awareness. You're working on a very broad-based state of concentration here. As the Buddha says, when a feeling of ease and rapture arises, you try to spread it throughout the whole body.

The image he gives is of a bathman or a bathman's apprentice kneading water into a pile of bath powder. In those days they didn't have soap. The bathman would start with some scented bath powder and then mix it with water, kneading the water into the powder until it formed a paste with which they'd bathe. It's similar to mixing water with flour to make bread dough: You want to mix it just right and knead it through thoroughly so that all the flour gets moistened in the same way. You don't add so much water that the water begins to dribble out, or so little that not all the flour gets moistened. That's what directed thought and evaluation are for. They're not extraneous to the first jhana. They're part of the process of arranging a good place for the mind to settle down. They help attain, someplace in the body, a balanced feeling of ease and refreshment, and then allow that ease and refreshment to fill the body, to knead it through the body if necessary, so that the whole body feels saturated and filled: with ease and refreshment, with breath, with awareness.

You'll notice that awareness has two aspects. There's focused awareness and then there's a kind of background awareness already in your body. You want to get them in touch with each other. The background awareness is

already there, just like the background breath energy in the body. The question in both cases, though, is: Is it full? When dealing with the breath, you're not trying to pump breath into areas where it's never been before. You're simply allowing everything to connect. And the same with your awareness: You want your focused awareness to connect with your background awareness so that they form a solid whole.

Now as you work with this, you may find after a while that everything is as saturated as it can get. No matter how much you try to make it more comfortable, it just doesn't seem to change. At that point you can just settle in with the breathing as it is, keeping your awareness centered and full. You gain a sense more and more that the breath and the awareness become one —because, after all, they're filling the same place. The awareness fills the body; the breath fills the body; each fills the other, and they become one.

The stronger the sense of oneness, the further and further away the hindrances go. They may nibble at the edges of your awareness here and there, but you really don't have to pay them any attention. You don't have to chase them away. If you chase them away, you drop the breath and they've got you. So you don't want them to trick you in that way. Whatever thought comes passing by, just let it go passing by. But the greater the sense of unity or unification here, the less the hindrances are going to be a problem. That right there is enough to get you solidly based.

From there the concentration can develop further. You may decide that the sense of rapture and refreshment is too coarse, that it actually becomes an irritant. You'd like something more refined and still. So tune-in to the area where there already is stillness in the awareness, where there already is stillness in the breath, and let the rapture do its thing. You don't have to play along with it anymore. You go under the radar, below the rapture, into a level of more subtle ease: relaxed and equanimous.

In the Canon the distinction between these two levels is described in terms of two different images. One is of a lake fed by a cool spring: That's the second jhana. There's a sense of upwelling, a movement of the waters. The cool water from the spring spreads to fill the whole lake effortlessly. There's no conscious effort, unlike the image of the bathman, who is deliberately working the water through the bath powder dough. Here the cool water just naturally spreads throughout the lake. But still there's a spreading, a sense of upwelling movement and refreshment.

In the image for the third jhana, though, the waters of the lake are totally still. Lotuses are growing totally submersed in the water, from the tips of the roots up to the tips of the flowers. No movement at all. Just the coolness of the water saturating them. As things get more and more connected, even the subtle movement of the breath in and out grows still. The awareness is still. The breath is still. Both fill the body with their stillness. This is the fourth jhana. In the image of this jhana, the water disappears altogether. There's just a light, white cloth covering the body. The equanimity here weighs less than the pleasure you've been soaking in, and your awareness throughout the body is very clear.

This is when your concentration is really strong. It's not the kind of concentration that blots out other things. It's just there. You've got the perception that gently but steadily holds it there. The world outside is still around you, but you don't send your awareness out to it. You stay with the sense of stillness in the breath, stillness in the body, stillness in the awareness.

There's a great sense of freedom, although there's still the subtle work of staying here. You don't want to drop it. But it's not nearly as complex as the earlier stages of concentration. Getting the mind to settle down like this is like a mother hen trying to gather her chicks together. In the beginning the chicks are running all over the place. The hen has to run here and there to round them up, but gradually she brings them into a smaller and smaller range until finally they all settle down together under her wings. That's the way it is with concentration. You're not trying to blot out anything; you just maintain your focus and gather everything in. The closer these things come together, the less effort is involved in keeping tabs on them. Another image they use in Thailand is of a red ant. The red ant, when it bites, just grabs on with its jaws. It doesn't let go. You can pull at its body, but the jaws stay in place even when its head has torn off.

So all you have to do is gather all your attention on the perception and sensation of the breath throughout the body, and then just hang on. If you do it skillfully, with this enlarged awareness, you settle down and develop a sense of concentration that's easy to maintain. If everything is focused just on one point, that concentration will easily be destroyed with the slightest movement. You may be able to maintain it when you're sitting very still, but as soon as you have to move the body, it's gone. But with the whole-body

awareness like this, where there's a sense of being settled and established with the entire body your frame, your center of gravity is low. The mind is broadly based, and isn't easily tipped over.

Even as you get up from the meditation, you can maintain that sense of full body as you walk around, as you deal with other things. It may not actually qualify as jhana, but it's a steady foundation. It's your foundation of mindfulness. It's an establishing of mindfulness, which after all is the theme or nimitta of the meditation. When the Buddha used the word nimitta, he didn't mean a vision or a light. He meant the topic of your meditation. And the topic of your meditation is what? It's the four satipatthana: the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, or mental qualities in and of themselves—all of which are right here.

It doesn't take much to move from body to feelings, or feelings to mind states, or mind states to mental qualities. They're very close together right here. But you choose one as your primary foundation or frame of reference. For instance, try to relate everything to the breath. As feelings come and go, see how they relate to the breath. How does the breath cause them? Which way of breathing helps to induce feelings of ease and rapture? When the ease and rapture seem to be coarse, which ways of breathing or conceiving of the breath allow everything to settle down into a more subtle state of equanimity? Which ways of breathing allow you to gain what the Buddha called an enlarged awareness, mahaggatam cittam.

In the establishings of mindfulness, he talks about different ways of categorizing the mind. As you read through the list, you see that the categories get more and more refined as your concentration gets more and more refined. So which ways of breathing help the mind get more refined? In terms of mental qualities, which ways of breathing are associated with the hindrances, which ways of breathing are associated with the factors for awakening? For example, the first three factors—mindfulness, the analysis of qualities, and persistence—are related to your directed thought and evaluation, trying to see what's skillful and what's not, trying to induce what's skillful and let go of what's not. How do you use the breath to develop these factors in such a way that gathers the remaining qualities—rapture and refreshment, calm, concentration and equanimity—here in the stages of concentration?

You want to hold on to the breath as your main frame of reference so that you don't get scattered. If you find yourself getting scattered, just drop those connections and stay simply with the sensation of the breath. Learn how to read your mind, to see when the mind is ready to start investigating these connections and when it really needs to just sit down and be still. Stay with the one perception that acts as a thread, keeps the mind right here, sews your awareness together with the body. You're creating a place where insight can arise. It requires a good solid foundation, a low center of gravity so that it's not easily knocked off. If you flit around from one frame of reference to another, you miss a lot of things, because in the flitting around there are going to be gaps. A lot of interesting things happen in the gaps, which you tend to miss. So think of your mindfulness of the breath as a long piece of thread that sews everything together over time. Anything that comes up in the body or in the mind, try to relate it to the breath.

This is the kind of concentration that can provide a good foundation for insight, for discernment. Its range of view is all around, with few blind spots. The stronger this concentration, the more refined the discernment you can develop. So don't worry about when to stop doing concentration and to start doing discernment work. As the Buddha said, it requires a certain amount of tranquility and insight in order to get the mind to settle down into strong concentration; then once it's in strong concentration, your tranquility and insight get more refined.

These things go together. You may find yourself leaning in one direction or another at any one time, but don't lean so hard that things tip over or get scattered. Try to keep everything together like this. The mind can then begin to cut through a lot of defilements, a lot of problems in a way that it couldn't when it was scattered. Ajaan Lee gives the image of gathering everything into a single drill bit that drills down into the earth in one place. Your concentration is here. Your mindfulness is here. Your insight is here. When they're all working together, the drill bit can go deep and cut through anything—even rock—because all these qualities are working together.

The Poison Blowfish

August 21, 2011

The Buddha didn't say that life is suffering but there is a lot of suffering in life. Birth, aging, illness and death, being separated from those we love, having to stay with things we don't love, don't like, not getting what we want: There's a lot of pain in life. This is why the Buddha's teaching is such a gift. He spent 45 years telling people how they could learn not to suffer in spite of all the pains and difficulties and separations in life.

So it's appropriate that we receive his teachings with gratitude. As he points out, when we're suffering, one, we're bewildered and, two, we're looking for someone to show us a way out. That's one of our first questions: Is there someone who knows a way out of this suffering? It's the most primal question in the mind. Even before we know words, that's a question that gets formed when we suffer as children: Can somebody help?

The Buddha, after all those many lifetimes of trying to find awakening, saw that this was the best use of his time: to show people how they're causing themselves to suffer and what they can do to change that so they don't have to suffer, even though there is birth, aging, illness, death, and separation—all the things we don't like about life. It is possible to experience these things and not suffer.

That's the essence of the skill that he taught. And it is important to see it as a skill. He said that he taught two categorical teachings, two teachings that were true across the board. One was that unskillful behavior should be abandoned, and skillful behavior should be developed. That's an activity. He didn't just say, "This is skillful; this is unskillful." He went on to say that this is what you should do: If you want to put an end to suffering, you should learn how to see where you're doing things that are unskillful, saying things that are unskillful, thinking things that are unskillful. Learn how to give those unskillful ways up. Replace them with more skillful behavior.

The other categorical teaching is the four noble truths, which point directly at the problem of suffering, what's causing it, and what can be done about it. For each of these truths there's a skill. You want to comprehend the

suffering so you can see what's causing it. When you see what's causing it, you let it go. You develop the path so you can realize the end of suffering. Those are all skills that have to be mastered.

It's so easy to get those tasks mixed up. We see something we don't like and we try to push it away, push it away. Either that, or we feed on our suffering and actually develop our suffering. In other words, we're applying the wrong tasks. You want to look at how you're suffering so as to understand exactly what's going on. There's the simple pain of the fact that things change, but that pain doesn't have to make inroads into the mind. There's something about the mind that takes it in, feeds on it, and then gets sick.

That's what the Buddha's teachings on clinging are all about. Clinging is a kind of feeding. We keep feeding on these different activities, hoping that they're going to give us some sort of satisfaction. It's like having poisonous food and telling yourself, "Well, if I fix it this way, it's not good. How about I fix it in another way or how about another way?" We just keep trying all these different ways of fixing that poisonous food in the hope that it's not going to poison us. It turns out there's no way you're going to fix it so that you won't poison yourself—except one, and that's turning the poison into the path. That way of fixing your food is going to strengthen you to the level where you don't need to feed anymore.

This is an important point. They talk about comprehension as being the duty with regard to suffering. In another passage the Buddha defines comprehension as developing dispassion. In other words, you understand something so thoroughly that you know you don't want to eat it anymore, you don't want to feed on it anymore. But the mind has to be strong before it can stop its feeding. Otherwise, it just keeps going back to its old ways. So you take these aggregates, you take the events of life, and you try to turn them into the path so you can gain that strength. And particularly, the strength of mindfulness, the strength of concentration, the strength of discernment. These are the things that enable the mind to stick with the path and work with it and develop it.

The discernment here is not just the discernment that comes at the end of the path when you finally realize, "Oh. I've been feeding on this stuff and it's not nourishing at all, I don't need it." Prior to that time, you have to

develop the discernment that motivates you to start along the path and to stick with it. That takes a lot of wisdom right there.

I was reading today someone saying that, "Well, you know, the Buddha in the Pali Canon: We don't really know if that's the true Buddha. You can't really trust it." But how would we know about the Buddha if we didn't have the Pali Canon? And how are we going to know whether we can trust it or not unless we try the teachings? Because that's what the teachings are for: If they help put an end to suffering, then they're genuine Dhamma. The thing is that testing them requires an awful lot. You have to be generous; you have to be virtuous. There are lots of things you have to give up, lots of things you have to do. If you decide beforehand, "We can't trust those texts, we'll just pretend that they're not there, treat them as stories, leave them at that": That's basically an excuse not to put them to the test.

Of course, everyone is free to do that, but the question is: Are you missing out on something important? You look around and how many teachings can you see that really promise to put an end to suffering in a way that makes sense?

This is one of the reasons why we have the reflection on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha as a way of giving strength to the mind and motivating you on the path. Here's a teaching that says it's within your capability to put an end to suffering; this is how you do it. You have the example of many people, many people who seem very reliable, who've put these teachings to the test and found that they passed the test.

So you develop a lot of wisdom in learning how to motivate yourself on the path, to keep yourself on the path, to keep going on the path. In that way, even though the mind is still feeding, it's feeding on something good. It's learning how to take those aggregates and feed on them in a way that's not poisonous.

It's like that blowfish they have in Japan. If you take out certain organs, it's not going to be poisonous. The thing is that the cooks that are really considered skillful are the ones that leave a little bit of the poison in so you get a little bit of numbness on your lips, so you have the thrill of getting a little bit close to death. But that's not the way the Buddha taught. If he were to cook the blowfish, he'd leave that organ out entirely. He wanted to leave behind a teaching that's totally safe—not totally foolproof, but totally safe. He'd say, "Look this is the safe way you practice. Feed on the aggregates by

getting the mind into concentration." In order to do that, you have to gain a sense, kind of a hands-on sense, of how you relate to form as you bring the mind to concentration, how you relate to feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness, because these are the raw materials for getting the mind into concentration and getting it to stay there. Focusing on the breath requires a sense of the form of the body from within, how your body feels when you're sitting here with your eyes closed, how you inhabit it. Then there's the perception, the mental label that keeps you there, and the verbal fabrications that direct your thinking to the breath and evaluate the breath, work with the breath. If you notice there are fabrications that go off someplace else, you have to learn how to say No to them and how to avoid them whenever possible. Then there are the feelings that come as a result of the breathing. There are the parts of the body that are in pain that sometimes the breath can't help and there are the parts that the breath can make really comfortable, really refreshed, satisfied, full. These are the things you deal with when you're bringing the mind into concentration.

Getting the mind concentrated gives you hands-on experience in distinguishing among these aggregates and learning how to feed on them in a skillful way so that you really do strengthen the mind. And you avoid the poison that comes when you really cling or identify them as you or yours. If you find the mind trying to leave concentration and go off to feed in other directions, you will realize, "Wait a minute. I don't need to feed that way, that doesn't really get anything, gain anything of any worth. It's not worth the effort." Because remember, you're not just feeding. You have to fix the food. So why fix poison for yourself?

This is how you begin to develop dispassion for things that used to hold a lot of interest for you, the things that you used to like to fix and then like to eat—either simply for the pure pleasure of it, or out of the thrill of doing something forbidden, or else out of a sense of obligation. We have all kinds of reasons for justifying that kind of effort while ignoring the pain and suffering that it causes. But it's when you're finally willing to look at it for what it is and see, "Okay, I've got something better here; there's a better way of feeding that doesn't have all that poison," and when it really hits you that there's nothing to be gained by that poisonous eating: That's when you learn how to let it go.

It's only when you've let go of a lot of your other attachments that you can start looking at the process of the path itself and begin to realize that this, too, involves a lot of fixing of food. There comes a point where you say, "Have you had enough?" This requires that you learn how to fix it really well and that the mind be really strong so it finally is willing to let go and stop that kind of feeding. To realize, "Okay, enough. I don't need any more of that kind of nourishment." That's when there's nibbida: the sense of disenchantment or distaste, basically the sense that you've had enough of that feeding. When you no longer want to feed on it, you begin to ask yourself, "Why would I want to keep fixing that kind of food?" When you feel no more passion for fixing that food, then the food supply stops. That's why dispassion follows on disenchantment, and why cessation—the cessation of food-fixing—follows on dispassion. If you're not going to eat it, why spend all that time in the kitchen? That's when you can let go—and that's when you're really free.

But even before you reach that point, you use the skills and insights you've gained from concentration, from seeing feelings and perceptions and fabrications and the ways in which they create all kinds of trouble or in which you create all kinds of trouble around them. You can start seeing how they function in your daily life as you deal with other people, as you deal with birth, aging, illness, death, and separation. You begin to see some of your feeding habits for what they are, that they're really unhealthy. This isn't easy because we have a lot of attachment to these habits. But as we stick with the path, we begin to reach that point where something in the mind says, "Enough." A huge sense of freedom comes with that.

It's amazing how the mind resists that freedom, which is why we have to keep at the practice again and again and again. But it's only through the practice that we get to the point where we can finally admit to ourselves, "Okay, I've had enough of that. I thought it was clever, I thought it was good, I thought it was..." whatever you used to justify all these activities to yourself. Then you can finally let them go.

So work on strengthening the mind as much as you can. Learn how to feed on the aggregates in a way that you don't have to get poisoned by them. Then you find that even just being on the path, you see a lot of the ordinary suffering of life just falling away, falling away. The path doesn't save all of its good things for the end. There's a lot of good in staying on the path.

Sometimes it's difficult, but the difficulties are all worth it. If you're really sensitive, you see that there is suffering falling away while you're staying on the path. You're avoiding a lot of ways that you could create trouble for yourself, for the people around you. It's a good path to be on.

Proactive with Pain

September 4, 2011

Aging, illness, death: These are the things we don't like to think about. And because we don't think about them, we tend to push them out of the mind. But that means that when they actually come, we're unprepared.

One of the Buddha's great gifts was teaching us the skills that we're going to need to face these things, so that we don't have to suffer. We suffer from these things, he said, because we cling; we're trying to feed on things that age, grow ill, and die. Because they slip through our fingers, we cling all the more, and that means we are going to suffer all the more as these things keep escaping from our grasp. So we have to look for a happiness that doesn't depend on that kind of clinging. We have to learn how to let go.

The first part of letting go is to remind ourselves that we're not the only ones experiencing aging, illness, and death. Everybody goes through these things. So when they happen, it's not that we've been singled out for any special torment or any special suffering.

There's a story in the Canon where King Pasenadi is talking to the Buddha, and one of his palace officials comes to tell him that his favorite queen has died. He breaks down and cries. The Buddha consoles him, "Have you ever known of anyone who was born who doesn't die? Anyone who was born who doesn't suffer from aging, illness, who doesn't experience separation?" It happens to all of us. When you can think in that way—of the larger picture—it helps to take some of the sting away. Then you can focus on how you're going to handle this well.

Two things basically happen: Pain comes in, and you feel pushed out by it. You try to push it away, and it just doesn't want to budge, so you go escaping to other places. The first thing you have to learn is how not to get pushed out by the pain. Meditating is good practice for this. Sit here for a while, and there's going to be pain here, pain there, pain in your back, pain in your legs, a dullness in the head sometimes. The first thing you've got to realize is that not everywhere in the body is there pain. There's going to be

some area in the body where things are at least okay. Focus your attention there.

Now, there is a tendency to go immediately back to the pain because you're worried about it, you're concerned about it, you want to keep it under your control. But you have to realize that pain is not under your control. So you want to establish yourself in a place where you have a greater sense of belonging, a greater sense of being okay, so that you can gather your strength, so that you feel less threatened by the pain.

This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath. Try to find a way of breathing through different parts of the body. If there's a pain in your head, try to breathe down through your hands and your feet. If there's a pain in your legs, focus more on the chest. If you can't find anywhere in the body that's comfortable, think of the energy surrounding the body outside. There's a sense of space, but there's also a force field around the body. Place your attention there. Stay with the space around your head, around your body. Make that your base camp, and then you can make forays into the body when the base camp is solid.

Because, as the Buddha said, if you want to get past pain, you have to comprehend it. First you want to see, well, what is this pain? There's a physical sensation, but there's also a whole series of perceptions around it and permeating it. The perceptions are what create a bridge between the physical pain and the sense of suffering in the mind. Sometimes we give the pain a shape—say, that it's located in the body right here, it's got that shape, it extends up the leg, say, from the knee and down to the shin; it's got its territory.

Well, that's a perception. You want to question that. How accurate is that perception? Does pain really have a shape? And is it really there in the body? Because body sensations are one thing; pain sensations are something else. Body sensations are things like the energy of the breath, the coolness of water, the heat of fire, the solidity of earth. The pain is none of those things. There may be a little bit of heat to go along with the pain, but the heat itself is not the pain. The pain is something else. So can you separate out these different types of sensations?

Or you can ask yourself: Where is the pain the worst? What's the worst spot of the pain? As you try to track it down, you come to realize that it seems to be in one spot and then it moves someplace else; as soon as you've

tracked down the second spot, it moves someplace else. You begin to realize it's not as solid or as intimidating as you first thought it was.

What you're doing is putting yourself out of the line of fire, and you're taking more pro-active approach to it so you're not the victim anymore. You're not the target. You're the investigator.

If you find it hard to do an investigation like that, at least hold this perception in mind: that the pain is not actually coming at you, you're watching it going away, going away. Each time there's a moment of pain, it's going away. It's like sitting in the back of one of those old station wagons where the back seat faced to the back of the car. You're driving down the road, and the things you see are going past you. They're not hitting you; they're not coming at you. They're going past you and going away, going past you and going away. Think of the pain in that way. If you hold that perception in mind, it's a lot easier to sit with the pain. You realize you can stay here and not get pushed out. If you see yourself as being in the line of fire, it's going to be hard to stay here. You're going to try to run away. But if you realize that the sensations of the body can be there and they're not the same as the pain, your awareness can be there and it's not the same as the pain, then you can stay right here, and you're not pushed away.

The other thing you have to watch out for is, when you're feeling pushed out by the pain, what the mind's going to latch on to. It can latch on to anger, it can latch on to greed, it can latch on to lust—it can latch on to all kinds of desires or worries. One of the worst things you can focus on as you're facing death is worry: either worries about what's going to happen to other people, or worries about what's going to happen to you.

So the first order of business is to remind yourself that as long as your mindfulness and alertness are good, you're safe. Because what will happen is that images will appear in the mind. Sometimes frightening images; sometimes attractive images. You have to keep reminding yourself that you don't have to go into them. You can stay here in the present moment, be fully aware of the present moment, not let yourself want to escape off into those other places, or feel that you're compelled to go to those other places. Learn how just to watch them arise, pass away, watch them arise, pass away.

As for your worries about the world, your worries about other people, remind yourself that these things have been largely out of your control anyhow. So there's no reason to want to try to exert control now that your

powers are failing you. The world is going to go its own way. Other people are responsible for their own kamma.

This is why we try to develop thoughts of equanimity, realizing that no matter how much we love other people, their kamma is beyond us. No matter how much we might dislike what other people may be doing, their kamma is beyond us. But you also have to realize that you are beyond their kamma as well. There's a place deep down in the mind that they can't touch, so to that extent you're safe. But that spot has to be protected, and you're the one who has to protect it. So develop your mindfulness, develop your alertness to stay right with that sense of knowing, knowing, knowing. The knowing can be right here, whatever pains that may arise can be right here, but the knowing is something separate.

It's like radio waves from different stations occupying the same spot in space, but they don't mix. They're separate stations, separate frequencies. Think of the pain as one dimension, think of your awareness as another dimension, the body is still another dimension. They intersect here, but they're separate things. Try to keep that sense of being separate, separate. Whatever arises, sights arise, sounds arise: See them as something separate from your awareness. You're aware of them, but the awareness is something else. Worries may arise, but try to look at them from the point of view of someone outside the mind. It's just a worry about something you're going to have to let go.

We practice letting go now, while we're still strong, so that the attachments won't weigh on the mind as the mind and body get weaker. We want to keep the mind as strong as possible. Learn how to separate your sense of awareness from your sense of the body, so that even though there may be a weakness in the body, the awareness is still strong, realizing that as long as you're with your awareness there's nothing to fear.

So learn how to not get pushed out of the present moment and how not to go running away from the present moment. Realize that there may be some unpleasant things here in the present, but you don't have to identify with them. They're just passing through passing through. You're the screen in a window. The wind comes passing through, the noises come passing through, dirty air, clean air, comes passing through, but the screen isn't affected by those things at all because it just allows everything to go right through.

The image in the Canon is of a net, like a net used to catch birds. Sounds and wind and things can go right through the net. But our net doesn't have to catch anything. Keep the holes in the net as large as possible so that nothing gets caught. That way, you're not pushed out of the present. And when you're not pushed out of the present, there's no reason to go grasping after anything else.

These are some of the skills you need to survive aging, illness, and death. Learn how to develop them now while you can, and they'll hold you in good stead. There will come a time in your life where the skills of other people can't help you, no matter how talented your doctors and nurses may be. There comes a point where the body just goes beyond what they can influence. This is why you want to have some control over your awareness, so that you can fend for yourself, and come through without suffering.

The Swinging Balance

March 10, 2011

When you focus on the present moment, you're trying to become friends with it. Tell yourself that you're going to focus on the breath and find a spot in the body where it's comfortable to stay, where it feels easeful. This can be anywhere in the body—deep in the body, on the surface of the body. Once you've found a spot, allow yourself to settle in. As you settle in, remember that you've got to develop a friendship here. That takes time, especially if you haven't been focusing much on the body or have been avoiding the body. It's all too easy, when you focus on the body, to barge in and just say, "This has to be that way, that has to be this way," and you start pushing the blood into different parts of the body, pushing the breath energy into different parts of the body where it doesn't feel comfortable. It's like trying to make friends with someone but not really listening to that person, not really seeing what that person needs or wants or likes.

What's required is a process of mutual adjustment. Find a way of staying focused where you're not putting too much pressure on things, but you're able to maintain the steadiness of your focus. The classic image is of a baby chick that you're holding in your hand. If you squeeze it too tight, it's going to die. If you hold it too loosely, it's going to fly away. So you have to find just the right amount of pressure to apply. Then notice how the breath responds. Notice how the mind responds. And as with any friendship, sometimes you ask straight-out questions, and other times you simply have to be observant over time.

As the Buddha once said, you don't really know a person until you've been with that person for a long time. Even then, you have to be observant. If you want to see that person's virtue, you have to live with the person for a long time and be observant. If you want to learn about a person's integrity, you have to have dealings with that person for a long time and be observant. If you want to know about the person's stamina and wisdom, you have to see how they deal with hardships and difficult topics and you have to be observant. In other words, it takes time and you have to use your powers of

observation. These are the two things you really have to apply as you're practicing so that you get a sense of what works, how you can bring the body and the mind together in a way where both are comfortable.

The breath is often a good focal point for doing this, but it's not for everybody, at least in the beginning. For some people it takes a longer time than for others. But if it takes time, don't get frustrated. It's simply a matter of learning how to listen, learning how to observe, and using your ingenuity. Those two qualities—being observant and being ingenious—are the two qualities that Ajaan Fuang would stress more than anything else when he taught meditation. He'd say, "Try this, and if that doesn't work then try that. If you've exhausted all the teacher's ideas, try to think up some approaches of your own so you can feel at ease here in the present moment."

Because if the mind doesn't feel at ease here, it's going to wander around all over the place and never find any rest. You wander out into the world and all you see are the injustices of the world. Even when people try to be nice to one another, it's just built into the world that there's a lot of feeding going on —emotional feeding, physical feeding. The simple fact that we're able to survive depends on our feeding, and somebody's going to get harmed, one way or another, when acting as food. If you look for a place out there for the mind to settle down and feel at ease, you're never going to find it. If you look inside at the very beginning, you look at your mind, and your mind is a mess; you try to focus on the breath, and the breath and the body seem to be a mess. You don't know where to go. This is where you have to take it on the Buddha's word, and the word of all the people who have practiced his teachings and gotten results, that it's true: If you focus inside, eventually things will settle down.

Sometimes there's a resistance, but that simply means you have to be very patient, very gentle, and very observant. If you push yourself too hard, it's like pushing yourself on someone else. You want to be friends, but they're not so sure yet, and the more you push, the more they step back. So you have to be more gentle, more indirect, with the idea in the back of your mind that eventually you will settle down here, just that it may take time.

The reason we want to settle down here is because we want to observe the mind. The Buddha said that before he got started on his practice, he looked at the world and saw that it was like fish in a stream that was drying up. The water was getting less and less and less, and the fish were

struggling with one another to get that last little bit of water. Of course, all of them were going to die. He said he looked at the world and felt really dismayed. But then he turned around and looked, and saw that the real problem is here in the heart. The heart is always going out there looking for happiness, but no matter how much you gain out there, you're going to lose it. At one point he said that even if it rained gold coins, we wouldn't have enough to satisfy our sensual desires. It's this arrow of craving in the heart: That's what's making us suffer. This was his real insight: that no matter how bad things were on the outside, it is possible to develop skill inside so that you don't have to suffer from those things. If you're not making yourself suffer, you're placing less of a burden on others as well.

So whatever amount of time it takes to get the mind to settle down is time well spent. I noticed when Ajaan Fuang was teaching people, his students would be coming from all sorts of different directions, and his instructions for some people would sometimes seem to contradict the instructions he'd give for other people. It's as if someone was off to the west, he'd say, "You have to go east, east, east to get to the point where you want to settle down." Other people were off to the east, so they had to go west, west, west. Some people would go straight to the right point, and others would take a while to circle around.

Finally, though, they would all get to a point where they could settle down, and the mind would be really still. In fact, both the mind and the body would be so still that even the breath itself would stop. Once they had gotten to that point in their meditation, everything would seem balanced. The mind was balanced in the present moment, the body seemed balanced, and from that point on everybody's practice seemed to follow the same steps.

But leading up to it, some people would have really strange experiences in their body, really strange visions, positive, negative, or their sense of the body would get distorted. I remember one time sitting with a group, and at the end of the session this one woman said she felt like she was sitting there with a body but no head, while all for that hour I had been sitting with the sense that all I had was a head and no body. I told her we should get together. She, by the way, was the one that gave me that old blanket that I still wear.

Sometimes you feel like your body is filling the whole room. Sometimes it feels really small. Sometimes it seems to be nothing but pain, other times it

seems to disappear. It can do all kinds of things. Just think of it as the various distortions things go through as you're learning how to settle down. And to emphasize that point of balance, when people would get to the point where the breath was still, Ajaan Fuang would have them focus on the sense of warmth in the body, the fire property. Then from there, on the coolness, the liquid property. Then the earth property, which was the solidity. And then he'd say, try to bring all these things into balance so it's not too hot, not too cold, not too heavy, not too light; try to find a sense of balance. Then, when you can maintain that, you've really mastered concentration.

That's the way it is with any balance: Think about those old-fashioned balances that swing back-and-forth. They go to the left, they go to the right, and it sometimes takes a while for them to reach equilibrium. Accept that that's part of the process of things settling down. Learn how to be patient with it because you're developing a sense of home. In Pali this is called vihara-dhamma, a place where the mind can stay, where it feels at home, at ease. To compare it with a friendship, it's a friendship where, finally, both people are happy together, and the friendship feels easy.

This is where you can settle down. The mind doesn't have to wander around so much. That reduces a lot of its suffering right there. The Pali term for wandering around is samsara. Sometimes we think of samsara as a place, but it's not really a place, it's a process the mind does. It's looking for happiness but hasn't found anything solid, so it keeps wandering. It tries to settle down here but it can't stay here. It has to move on to something else, can't stay there, either. It's constantly on the move. As we're meditating, we're trying to find a home, a place where the mind can settle down at least long enough so that it can look into itself to see, well, what is this arrow of craving, what is this arrow of clinging? What is the ignorance that keeps us suffering?

This is basically the good news of the Buddha's teachings, that the suffering comes from within, which means that we can cure it. If suffering were totally caused by outside circumstances, we'd be victims, and there'd be nothing we could do about it. But because the primary causes are inside, then once you get the mind to settle down and you're in the present moment, you can look inside and figure things out: In what ways are your intentions unskillful? In what way is how you look at things unskillful? How can you change those ways so that you're not constantly primed to suffer all

the time? As you dig down through those habits, you find—as you clear them away, straighten things out inside—that there really is a happiness that doesn't require any work at all. It's just there. That's where the wandering stops.

So as you're practicing, accept the fact that there will be some swings in the balance. But eventually that balance will come to a point of equilibrium and, at the point of equilibrium, things open up, and you actually go beyond the equilibrium. But this is the first step in the direction for happiness that really is satisfying, that really doesn't require any more work, any more wandering around at all. That's what the Buddha teaches, and he teaches it as a challenge. He said there is this possibility for true happiness. It's something human beings can attain. So it's up to us to decide whether we're ready for that challenge, whether we're interested in the possibility of a happiness that's totally true, totally free.

As the Buddha once said, if you could make a deal that people would come and stab you with 300 spears a day—100 in the morning, 100 at noon, 100 in the evening—for100 years, with the guarantee that at the end of the hundred years you to get awakening: If you could make that deal, it would be worth it. And when you attained awakening, you wouldn't think that you had attained it with suffering. The awakening would be accompanied by joy. The happiness he promises is that amazing.

So keep that in mind as you face difficulties in the practice: that sitting through those difficulties is not 300 spears, and that the goal is more than worth the trouble of trying to develop the sense of balance, friendship, and home inside.

A Recipe for Jhana

February 14, 2009

When you meditate, try to be very conscious of holding a particular perception in mind. In this case, it's very simple: the perception of the breath. That's all you have to think about.

As you sit here, being sensitive to the body, be sensitive to it as breath. Just think, as you feel your energy in the body, that it's an aspect of breathing. Any flow as the breath comes in, the breath goes out: It's all breath. And, looking at it as breath, be sensitive to how it feels coming in.

If you've ever had bodywork done, sometimes you'll notice that as a muscle gets released, as its tension gets released, something you took for granted all along—that that part had to be hard, had to be solid, had to be held—didn't have to be that way. It could be released. It could be relaxed. You change your perception of it.

It's the same way with focusing on the breath: Think of everything you feel in the body as being related to breathing, part of the breath energy. That's the breath energy coming in and going out. There's also the breath energy that's just there in the body, regardless of whether the breath is coming in or going out or being still. Just breath, breath, breath. Hold that perception in mind.

And be sensitive to how comfortable the breathing feels. What kind of breathing feels best right now? The best way to answer that question is to allow yourself to breathe in different ways for a while. Think, "long breathing," and see what happens. Then you can think, "shorter breathing," to see how that feels, and decide which one you prefer. You can think "deeper" or "more shallow," "heavier," "lighter."

As you get more sensitive to the breathing in the body, think, "whole body." Try to be aware of the whole body all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes. You'll find that your awareness has a tendency to shrink, so be very careful to remind yourself each time you breathe in, "whole body"; each time

you breathe out, "whole body." Try to notice what effect the breath has on your sensation of the body. Sometimes breathing will feel good in the arms. Sometimes it will be related to tension, say, in your shoulders, in your back, in your legs. So you've got a wide range here to be sensitive to. What ties it all together is that one perception of "breath, breath, breath." And that's the recipe for meditation.

You can also call it the recipe for jhana.

The descriptions in the Canon, when the Buddha talks about meditation, fall into two kinds. There are the how-to recipes and then there are the descriptions of what you get at the end of how-to. It's like the different kinds of writing on food. Some authors will give you the recipes, saying, "You do this and you do that," and you get the dish that you want. Other authors—such as restaurant critics—like to talk about the finished product. It's important that you not mistake the two kinds of writing for each other. In other words, you can't use a restaurant review to figure out how to cook the dish that's been described. For instance, you hear about soufflés and a restaurant critic would say, "Well, the soufflé wasn't very good because it was heavy. That other soufflé was better because it was light and airy." You see the word "airy," so you go to the kitchen and you bring in your air compressor. You try to pump air into the eggs. What you get is a mess all over the walls.

Or you might try to reverse-engineer a dish. You tasted something and you figure out what this must be—based on what you know about the various foods you've encountered. If you're a really good cook, you can reverse-engineer some things, but there are also disasters. For instance, years back somebody in Thailand came to America and had a salad with mayonnaise dressing. The person went back to Thailand and decided to re-create the dressing. He knew it was white, it was creamy. Condensed milk was well-known in Thailand, so he reverse-engineered the dressing based on what he knew: a salad dressing based on condensed milk. That became the standard salad dressing through Thailand. All through my early years there, whenever you went to a restaurant that had Western food, if they had a salad, it would have a dressing based on condensed milk. It was awful.

So be careful when you meditate not to read the descriptions of the finished product as a recipe. In other words, you read about how jhana has directed thought and evaluation, and pleasure and rapture and singleness of

preoccupation, so you try to bring all those things together. You make them the object of your meditation. But that's not how you get the mind to settle down. You get the mind to settle down by focusing on the breath, with some very simple instructions: Be sensitive to when the breath is long, when it's short. Once the breath is comfortable, spread your awareness to fill the whole body and then notice how the breathing has an impact on the way you experience the body. Try to calm that impact, so that the breathing feels smooth and easy, doesn't create tension as you breathe in, and you're not holding on to tension as you breathe out. Your sense of holding a body here in the present moment gets lighter and lighter.

Just notice how the breath has an impact on the body: That's all you have to do. You don't have to think about directed thought or evaluation, you don't have to think about pleasure or rapture. Just think about being sensitive to the breath, being sensitive to the whole body. Then notice how the sense of the breath, as the Buddha said, fabricates or has an impact on your sense of the body, and do what you can do to calm it down.

There's a story that Luang Phor Phut tells about when he was a young novice staying with Ajaan Sao. Ajaan Sao was a man of few words. He would say, "Meditate on the word buddho." People might ask him, "What does buddho mean?" He'd say, "Don't ask." "What's going to happen when meditating on buddho?" "Don't ask. Just repeat the word in your mind." You'd go back home, try it, and then come back to tell Ajaan Sao, "Okay, when I do this, these are the results I have." He would tell you whether you were heading in the right direction or the wrong direction. Then he would tell you how to go from where you'd been.

In other words, he wasn't interested in explaining everything beforehand. He was interested in giving the recipe, not the restaurant review. Luang Phor Phut said that as a young novice he would read the books that Ajaan Singh had written. Now, Ajaan Singh tended to be more elaborate in his discussion. He'd say, "Establish mindfulness." So Luang Phor Phut would go and ask Ajaan Sao: "Ajaan Singh says to establish mindfulness. Why don't you say, 'Establish mindfulness,' in your meditation instructions?" Ajaan Sao would respond, "If you just start repeating the word buddho and keep it in mind, that's establishing mindfulness right there. You don't have to go into long descriptions." He'd just tell you how to do it.

It's by focusing on "how to" that you get the best results. Ajaan Fuang was a similar sort of teacher. He'd give you basic instructions and send you off to meditate on your own. If you had any speculative questions about the meditation, or you wanted to check what kind of jhana you're attaining, he wouldn't be interested. He'd just say, "Stay focused on the breath. Tell me what the breath feels like as you stay focused on it." If it felt heavier or whatever, he would say, "Okay, in that case do it this way, or think of it that way," to guide you along the path, without giving you a lot of advance notice about what was going to come up further along the path.

You'd find that you'd start getting results without having to think about the books. Later on, as you started experiencing different things in the meditation, it was convenient to have those maps, to have those restaurant reviews, to get a sense of where you were, so that you could sort out the terrain in your own mind. But it was best to have some experience first before you got obsessed with the descriptions. Otherwise, you start squeezing things in line with your preconceived notions, and of course, what are your preconceived notions based on? They're based on ignorance.

Ajaan Thong, who is now the abbot of Ajaan Lee's monastery, gave an example once of a person who has an unripe mango in his tree. His friends tell him, "You've got an unripe mango. It's green, it's hard. What you want is a ripe mango, which is soft and yellow." So the guy goes and paints the mango yellow and squeezes it to make it soft. But he doesn't get a ripe mango. What he gets is a mess. You don't focus on the mango. You focus on the roots of the tree. You water them. You give them fertilizer. The mango will take care of itself.

This way, you learn an important lesson: Things happen according to causes. Get the causes right, and the effects will have to come. At the same time, the Buddha's instructions get you developing both insight and tranquility as you practice. As you're aware of the whole body, it's hard to think about anything past or future as you're spreading awareness to fill the whole body. The more you inhabit the present moment, fully inhabit the body in the present moment in this way, the harder it is to go thinking about past or future. That helps with the tranquility.

Then, when you start looking at how the breath has an effect on the body, you're learning to think in terms of fabrication, which is the topic of insight. As you calm the fabrications down, that brings about more

tranquility. The insight and tranquility go together, without your having to think about the words "tranquility" or "insight."

Without getting involved in all the many discussions that revolve around those two terms, you just look at how you experience the breath in the present moment, and see it as a process of fabrication. As you get more sensitive to what you're doing, you begin to see simply that the perception of breath fabricates the way you experience things, fabricates the feelings of pleasure or not-pleasure, ease or dis-ease that come up.

So you're learning to look at your experience of the present moment not simply as a given, but as something that you're participating in. And you have the power to participate in a more skillful way, a way that gives rise to a greater sense of ease, lightness, fullness, without your having to read the restaurant reviews and try to make it lighter with an air compressor, or make it full by stuffing in food. Your sense of the body just grows that way as you get more sensitive to how the breath feels and how you can calm down the impact of the breath on the body.

This way, you learn to see the power of your perception by holding on to that perception of breath—that it really does change the way you experience things. This is an important insight in and of itself. In the very beginning, it seems very unlikely: How could holding on to this one perception have that much of an impact? We've all had perceptions in the past, they come and they go, but if you really hold on to one, and are convinced it will make a difference, you find ultimately that it does.

Even when you think about it in terms of everyday experience, you'll see that your perceptions really do have an impact on what you see. Suppose you saw a picture in the newspaper of a woman, say, in her 60s, looking very disgruntled, and suppose the caption under it said, "the victim of a bank scam." You look at her expression of being disgruntled and you sympathize with her. But if the caption said, "This was the mastermind behind the bank scam," you'd have a very different feeling about her, simply based on the perception.

Well, the same principle applies to your body, applies to the present moment: The perception you hold in mind will have a huge impact on how you experience things. So trust in the fact that holding on to this perception of "breath, breath, breath" as you breathe in, as you breathe out, "whole-body breath" as you breathe in, as you breathe out, "calming the breath" as

you breathe in, breathe out, can take you to a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, a feeling in which you can really settle down in the present moment and be very clear and alert about it. It really can make a change in what you're experiencing.

That's a very important lesson right there: that what you choose to focus on and how consistently you hang on to that focus can have a huge impact on what you're experiencing. Then you learn how to take this lesson and apply it to other aspects of life: When you're sick, when you're bored, when you're anxious, whatever the situation outside, you realize, "I may not be able to change the situation outside, but I can change my perception so that I don't have to suffer so much. And when I'm not adding any excess suffering, this makes things lighter for other people as well."

So there are a lot of lessons to learn here, just in those simple instructions, the Buddha's basic recipe for how to get the mind to settle down with clarity and a sense of well-being.

Try not to clutter up your mind with a lot of restaurant reviews. Sometimes you read them and they sound impossible. Can any mere mortal like us attain those states? Well, we can. But it's not by reading the descriptions and trying to create a recipe out of the descriptions. The recipe is in the basic breath meditation instructions. Again, it's like fixing a soufflé. You mix the ingredients together and you ask yourself, "How could this ever become light and airy?" Well, it can, if you do it right. And it is possible to attain strong states of concentration and to feel at home in them. But make sure that you're selective in which instructions you keep in mind, and which descriptions to leave for another time.

This is one of the paradoxes of the Buddha's teachings. He says that the teachings are timeless. And they are. But at the same time, different teachings are useful for different types of situations. So make sure that you're focusing on the right teaching that's right for here, right here, right now, and the results will have to come.

Sensitive to the Breath

December 25, 2011

When you work with the breath, it's good to not have too many preconceived notions about what a good breath is going to be, or the general direction that you're breathing should go. I was reading a letter recently from someone who'd picked up the idea someplace that, as the mind settles down, your breath grows shorter. So he put the cart before the horse and tried breathing shorter in order to get his mind to settle down. He found that his short breathing was not refined at all. It wasn't making his mind calm. There are people who will stifle their breath energy in hopes of making it refined and calm, and end up putting themselves to sleep. So you really have to be alert to what the body needs right now, what the mind needs right now, so the two of them can stay together.

If the breath is too soft, too refined, and you're not really ready for it yet, the body is not really ready for it yet, it depletes the level of your energy. Of course, if the breath is too harsh, it's hard to settle down.

It's also easy sometimes to get stuck on a particular type of energy. There was a woman who was a student of Ajaan Fuang's. She was a very good meditator, but she had been away from him for a long time. It was actually during my first visit there that she showed up at the monastery. One of the comments he made to her that evening as we were sitting in meditation was, "Wait a minute, you're spending too much time with the cool breath, the very refined breath." He said, "It's not good for your health to spend all your time with refined breathing. You have to vary things. You have to look at what the body needs. There are times when it needs energy, so you've got to breathe in a way that gives it more energy." So try to listen carefully to the body's needs. Look at the mind's needs as well.

We talk about listening or looking at the breath, but, of course, it's not a matter of looking or listening with the eyes or ears. It's a matter of being really sensitive to what the body needs. Now, you do want to be very careful, and this is where the analogy of listening comes in. Think of it as an analogy, of course. There are times when you listen very, very carefully for

very subtle sounds and that helps to refine the breathing, because the mind is more intent and more sensitive at that time. That's when it's really ready for refined breathing. But if you're not ready for it, you just drop off to sleep. So in the same way that you would, say, listen to the inner voices of a piece of music, the ones that are hard to hear, or to a very soft sound off in the distance, try to make yourself really, really quiet, and very, very intent. That will help make the breath more subtle without your forcing the breath too much.

But listen to the body and the mind: If you run up against the symptoms that show that the breathing is too subtle, then you've got to go in the other direction. Some of the symptoms are headaches, a sense of constriction in the body, that the breath energy's been closed off. That's when you have to work with breathing that may be a little bit uncomfortable for a while. Push it, expand the rib cage more than normal. Expand your stomach, the abdomen, more than normal. Really emphasize the in-breath as much as possible. And put up with the fact that it's going to be uncomfortable for a while, as you get yourself into a new cycle, or a new rhythm of breathing. Then, when the body's ready, you can let things calm down again.

What all this comes down to is, as you're experimenting with the breath, remember not to let your preconceived notions get in the way. Even the instructions of the breath meditation saying, "Breathe in a way that's as comfortable as possible": There are times when you have to breathe in a uncomfortable way to get out of a breath cycle that's too gentle or too stifled.

This means you've got to use your ingenuity.

Years back I mentioned to Ajaan Fuang that he should write a little guide to breath meditation. He said, "Well, everything's already there in Ajaan Lee's books." I said, "But those are just the basic principles, and you've got a lot of little details that are really fascinating." The ways he would recommend that you play with the breath: Sometimes he'd talk about breathing in the bones. Another time he talked about how when he was young, he tended to suffer pretty heavily from headaches. He found that if he could emphasize the breath going down the spine and think of it going from the base of the spine out into the ground, that helped to relieve the pressure in the head. He had lots of little tricks like this.

But he still resisted the idea of writing a book about them. Part of the reason may have been that learning these little tricks requires ingenuity. It

develops your ingenuity. And ingenuity is an important skill you want to develop on your own as a meditator. You work with the basic principles and then you stretch them to see how far they stretch before they reach the breaking point. There are times when you experiment too much and you go too far away, and then you've got to recognize that and come back. But recognize also the fact that the principles are there as something to hold on to in the beginning so that you're not totally lost. They'll point out areas where you should focus, or where you might profitably focus, but what you're going to see depends on you.

You have to learn how to read not only the breath, but also the body and the mind. Learn to read the times when the mind is exerting too much control over the breath. Those times when, no matter how you breathe, it always seems wrong. In a case like that, you have to use a psychological trick. Just say, "Okay, I'm going to let the breath do its own thing. I'm just going to sit here and I'm not going to help it. If the body's going to breathe, it'll' have to breathe on its own." It'll be quiet for a little bit, and then, of course, the body will have to breathe. All you have to do is watch. That can help get you out of that particular dead end.

There are lots of little details that are really useful in the practice that you can't put in a book, in any kind of book. The most useful books are the ones that give you the general principles, point out where to look, what questions to ask, as a starting point. Because we're not here to simply clone somebody else's awakening. We're not robots.

I had a really scary phone call this evening from this guy who had suddenly realized that, yes, we are robots. "What the Buddha said about there being no self is really true," he said. "Why would anyone want to have the idea of the self?" And he had this really creepy laugh as he said it. It sounded like somebody going crazy. So I reminded him that the Buddha did not say there is no self, he did not say we are robots. If you don't use your sense of self, you can't function. You have to use some sense of self all the way to the very last step before awakening. Which means that we have to be sensitive to how we use our sense of self, when it's skillful, when it's not.

This task of learning how to develop your sensitivity is the hard part of the meditation, the part that really demands a lot out of you: learning how to read the situation, how to know when you've gone wrong, how to back off, and try something different. Meditation is not a process of putting the mind

through a meat grinder or through a machine or some sort of factory, where the process will take care of everything for you. It's only as you develop your sensitivity to cause and effect—what you do and the results you get, what's working and what's not working, what things are connected, what things are separate—along with your ingenuity, and learning how to benefit from that sensitivity: That's what's going to bring about progress in the meditation.

So it exposes you. You're not protected on all sides by instructions. But it's only when you expose your mind in this way that you're really going to learn something new.

Generating Energy

January 2, 2012

In Thailand they sometimes compare practicing meditation to flying a kite. It takes a fair amount of effort to get the kite up in the air, until it finally catches the wind, but then it doesn't take much effort anymore. The energy of the practice, at that point, keeps feeding itself.

Now, in Thai, the phrase "catching the wind," is actually a play on words, because the word for "wind" and the word for "breath" are the same word, lom. When you practice and finally get to the breath, when it feels easiest to stay with the breath, that's when you've caught the wind. The practice picks up its own momentum. The tricky part, of course, is getting the kite up into the air, getting to the point where the energy you put into the practice gets less and less, and the practice itself produces the energy you need.

It's something you'll find at various stages in the practice—it doesn't simply happen once and for all—that you catch the wind and then have no more problems. Sometimes the kites will fall down, and you have to get them back up in the air. So it's good to know some ways of generating energy so that you'll be able to get things up in the air, to catch the wind again.

When the Buddha discusses persistence in the five strengths, it builds on conviction. That's one of the mental ways of giving rise to more energy. Another is in the context of the seven factors for awakening, where persistence builds on mindfulness: keeping something in mind. So, what are the ways of giving rise to conviction that are going to energize you, and what are the things you have to keep in mind that will give rise to more energy?

In the seven factors for awakening, the Buddha talks about qualities that act as a foothold for the energy or the potential for energy, but then he doesn't explain what they are. This is where you have to look around in yourself. This is also where you have to learn from others—that's the part you have to keep in mind.

It essentially comes down to two sorts of sources: sources within the mind and sources within the body. In terms of the body, you may want to look at the way you're breathing, because there are some very peaceful and calm ways of breathing that actually deplete the energy in your body. So if you find that your energy level is low, what can you do to change the way you breathe? Try to notice which parts of the body seem to be overworked, the ones that are doing all the work in the breathing, but don't seem to be getting any refreshment from the breath. Consciously relax those parts and say: If the body is going to breathe in, other parts will have to take over, but these parts are going to stay relaxed, regardless. You'll find that other parts of the body will pitch in. Watch that for a while. See if the way they're breathing actually does improve the energy in the body.

Sometimes you have to remind yourself that the body is, as you directly experience it from within, all breath. Whatever sensation comes up, think of it as an aspect of breath energy, and then ask yourself: Is that healthy breath energy or not? If it were healthy, what would it feel like? Because sometimes you hold in mind the perception that a sensation is solid, and you put up with all kinds of stuff from solidity that you wouldn't put up with if you thought this was breath. Then conversely, there are times when you feel a need for something really solid and grounding to get your energy going. So you have to play with your perceptions here, to see which perceptions of what's going on in the body can actually be helpful.

There are parts of the body that you may be suppressing, that could actually be a source of energy. Ajaan Lee talks of the breath that goes up the spine, and the breath that goes up the centerline in the front of the torso. Do you have any room for that kind of breath energy in your concept of the way you breathe? Or do you squash it? Or when you're feeling tired, which parts of the body are you focusing on as feeling tired? Then check to see which parts are actually okay. Switch your perception around to the parts that are okay. See what that does.

In other words, realize that there are pockets of energy in the body—and not just in the body, all around you. Ajaan Lee talks about the elements that surround the body and can give nourishment to it. Sometimes these elements can come into the different chakras, or the different resting points of the breath, as Ajaan Lee calls them. Think of an energy outside the body coming in and nourishing the point in the middle of the chest, nourishing

the point in the middle of your head, any point that seems to need extra energy. Tap into the energies around you. There are some good ones. Learn how to recognize the good ones that feel refreshing as soon as you allow them in.

So there are potentials there that you may not have thought about. It's good to remember that there are those possibilities. That's what mindfulness is for.

As for energy that comes from the mind, the Buddha talks about gladdening the mind: thinking about topics that give rise to a sense of inspiration. These can be the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha, your own generosity, your own virtue. Sometimes putting the breath aside for the time being and thinking about these things can be very helpful. Thinking about the Sangha for instance: Think about all the ajaans and the success they had in the practice. Remember that they were human beings, you're a human being. They could do it; you can do it. This is the message they always give.

One of the purposes of this is to dig out any attitudes you may be holding that are actually harmful, that actually sap your energy—such as the attitude that "I probably won't be able to get anywhere in this lifetime. I'll just muddle around a little bit, and I hope that things will go better next time around." Ask yourself if part of your mind is holding on to that. And why would it want to hold on to that? It might be that it doesn't want to put out too much effort, or you don't want to set the bar too high. But what you're doing as you set the bar low is beating yourself down with the bar. If you're more open to the possibility that, Yes, you could attain one of the noble attainments in this lifetime, does that energize you? Does it scare you? Look into that.

Another contemplation that can give rise to energy is the contemplation of death: realizing that you don't know when death is going to come, or how it's going to come. All these prophecies have been floating around about the year 2012, the end of the world, the reverse of the magnetic poles or whatever. But you may not even live to see the end of the world. Something might happen before then. This is not meant to get you depressed. It's meant to motivate you to realize that important things need to be done in the mind right now. If aging, illness and death come—or, rather, when they come—what qualities of mind are you going to need?

You see some people as they approach death, and they just get totally thrown off balance. They can't even allow themselves to think about the future, for the future holds nothing but an empty blank for them. If they had a bad past, that's something they don't want to think about either. This, I think, is one of the reasons that dementia often flares up as death approaches. You don't know where to focus your mind. But if you have a meditation practice, you know you can focus right here at the breath. Maintain this awareness of the present moment so that the mind doesn't go flailing around. You're going to need mindfulness, you're going to need alertness, you're going to need as much concentration and discernment as you can muster.

And when are you going to develop those qualities if you don't develop them now? Right now is an ideal opportunity. You're sitting here meditating. It's quiet around you. One of the contemplations the Buddha has the monks reflect on—and it's one of the ones King Asoka recommended in one of his edicts—is to think about future dangers. Aging, illness, and death can come; social unrest can come; a split in the Sangha can come. If you tell yourself, "Well, I'll just wait until my next lifetime," he warns that the Dhamma and the Vinaya are going to deteriorate over time. The opportunities don't get better. They get worse. So you make use of the opportunities you have now. In this case, you're motivating yourself with a little bit of fear: the wise kind of fear, the fear that's related to compunction and heedfulness.

So it's up to you to observe what you need to think about to motivate yourself to practice. Sometimes you need the positive side of the encouragement, so you hold out a carrot. But sometimes you need the stick to remind yourself that if you don't do the work now, it's not going to get easier. They've done studies of people who are really expert in physical skills and they've discovered that these people have the ability to motivate themselves using both types of motivation: a strong sense of the harm that can be done if you don't master the skill, and a strong sense of the benefits that can come when you do. So you have to learn how to deal with your own mind, and when one method of motivation isn't working, remember you've got other possibilities, other choices, other tools in your kit.

What it comes down to is that you try to find sources of energy in the body, and sources of energy in the way you think, that you can then channel into your mindfulness, alertness, and concentration, that give more ardency

to the practice, so that the kite can get up in the air. Ideally when your energy turns into right effort, one of the results is rapture: refreshment, a sense of well-being that then becomes food for the concentration. This is when the kite finally catches the wind. You're focused on the breath in the way that gives rise to a sense of fullness, and then you feed off of that, so that you can stay with it more consistently, with a greater sense of solidity, stability.

So remember that right effort is not just a matter of brute force. It requires your ingenuity and your intelligence, your ability to find sources of energy that you've overlooked or that you've been squashing. Look at the way you think, look at the way you breathe, look at the way you hold your body. See if there's anything you can change. Any ways of thinking that are keeping you down, learn to question them. Any ways of breathing that are stifling your energy, just drop them. Ask yourself: Which parts of the body are getting starved of energy? Where is some energy in another part of the body that can help nourish them? If it can't be found in the body, remind yourself there's energy around the body, so tap into that.

This is what mindfulness is good for: to remember that you've got these potential sources. Don't forget them. The skill lies in learning how to put them to use, so that the kite gets up into the wind, and the energy can feed on itself to keep the practice going, making it steadier and more reliable, with mindfulness feeding your persistence, and persistence feeding your mindfulness. That way, both of them do become what they call dominant factors in the mind.

Balance & Release

January 27, 2011

When we focus the mind on the breath, we can observe both of them. Ideally, it's good to be able to observe both of them together. Although some people find it easier to observe the breath, others find it easier to observe the mind. But it's important to be able to watch them as they interact.

First, you want to know when the mind wanders from the breath. You want to know when the mind feels comfortable or uncomfortable with the breath, so you can do something about it. There are four steps to breath meditation that focus directly on the mind: being sensitive to the mind as you breathe in, breathe out; gladdening the mind; steadying the mind; and releasing the mind. These four steps basically tell you what you're going to be doing when your frame of reference is the mind.

First, be sensitive to what's going on in the mind. The breath is a good way of doing that. It's very close to the mind. It gives you an anchor, a reference point. Without a reference point, it's very easy for the mind to drift around without noticing that it's drifting. But if you give it a specific task to do, then you can see clearly when it's with the task and when it's not. It's like sitting in a train in a train station. You look over to a train next to yours, and you realize that either your train is moving or the other train is moving, but if you can't see a post between the trains, you have no idea which is which. You need that post as a reference point. The breath provides that post for the mind.

Once you're sensitive to watching the mind, there are three basic activities you can do with it. One is to gladden it. In other words, try to bring the mind's energy level up if it's too low. Another is to settle it down and steady it, when its energy is too erratic, all over the place. Finally, you release it.

Generally, you want to bring the mind into balance before it can be released. There's a popular misconception that awakening is like a neurotic breakthrough. You go through a really bad dark night of the soul and all of the sudden the light opens and everything dark falls away. Although there

are few accounts of awakening in the Theragatha and Therigatha that depict people going through really bad periods before reaching awakening, the general picture in the Canon is one of bringing the mind into balance. That's what the gladdening and steadying are all about. When you find the mind's energy level is low, you've got to bring it back up to the proper level. If it's too high, you bring it back down.

This is reflected in the teachings on the seven factors for awakening. The energizing factors are analysis, right effort, and rapture. The calming factors are calm, concentration, and equanimity. Because these terms are abstract and general, it's up to each meditator to find specific or personal techniques that work for each factor. For example, find some way to get interested in the breath. It helps gladden the mind to remember that it's working on something worthwhile. I found it really helpful when I first got into breath meditation to work with the breath energy at a sore or injured spot. It gave a sense that I was doing something positive and constructive. I could really see some results.

You can think of the breath as a healing process or a rejuvenating process. Ajaan Lee noted that as people get older, the out-breath gets longer than the in-breath, and the energy level of the breathing goes down. You might consciously try to fight aging by doing longer in-breaths and shorter out-breaths to see if the breath can have a rejuvenating influence on the body. Whatever technique you find that gives more energy to your practice is helpful. Ajaan Fuang once said, "You have to be really crazy about this to do it well." Otherwise, you might not be paying close attention when things seem to be going okay, and then "okay" begins to get a little loose, shaky, wobbly. That's when you have to heighten your level of involvement and focus. To get very involved in an activity, whether it's sharpening knives or doing carpentry work, could easily be labeled obsessive; but really getting involved with your work makes you better at it.

It's the same with the breath. You want to be really obsessed with exploring what the breath energy is doing in the body, in how it relates to the other elements and sensations in the body. When the breath seems to be going well, can it get better? When the energy level is down, experiment with getting more interested in how the meditation can lift your spirits.

However, if playing with the breath is just getting you more frazzled, that's a sign you need to get the mind steadier. This is when you develop

patience, serenity, and equanimity. Whatever comes up in the practice, you're just going to watch it for a while, and not fiddle around so much with the breath. Give everything a chance to settle down and to do its own thing. Slow the breath down. Spread your awareness to fill the whole body, so it can't move so easily back into the past or off into the future.

When the mind is in equilibrium, with the level of energy just right: That's when it's a lot easier to release it from its attachments. Otherwise, the release is just aversion, dislike. You're trying to run away from something. You don't like this; you don't like that. You push yourself away. But the pushing becomes another type of becoming. As the Buddha said, craving for non-becoming leads to more becoming.

The image of the middle path can be the middle point of a spectrum or it can be off the spectrum entirely. Release comes in getting off the spectrum. In balancing between excessive energy and deficient energy, you bring the mind into the middle of the path, the middle point of the spectrum. That's the point where you can get off. Most of us think that the jumping-off point is found at the extreme ends. The Buddha, though, says the jumping off point is right in the middle where everything is balanced: tranquility is balanced with insight; the energy feels just right; the levels of desire, persistence, intentness, and analysis are all just right as they converge. It's when everything feels balanced, and you're very alert, that you begin to see things you didn't see before. You're in a more neutral position. The neutral position is what allows you to see.

Try to develop specific techniques to bring the mind into balance and to get a sense of where that point of balance is. When is your energy level too high, and when is it too low? Where are the danger points? One is when you've been practicing for a long time and the results aren't coming as quickly as you like. Or things were going well, and now they're not going as well as they used to. That's when you've really got to work at gladdening the mind. When something really good happens and the mind starts generating all kinds of excitement, that's when you've got to steady it, so you can watch what happens next.

You don't want to get excited by your insights, because the really useful insights come in watching what happens after an impressive insight. If you're excited by the first insight, you miss the important point: Where does it lead? We're trying to watch cause and effect. When the Buddha boiled

down what happened on the night of his awakening, he described it as the discovery of a causal principle. Sounds pretty mundane. But he realized it was essential to his awakening, seeing what caused what, and then how you could manipulate the causes to get the results going in the direction you want them to go.

So when an insight comes, see what happens as a result of having that insight. Don't get carried away by it. Maintain your steadiness. Some very interesting things happen after the initial burst of insight and more subtle insights can arise. Be really careful about the level of balance you maintain. Then you can understand what led you to get latched on to something or led you to get pushed away or bored with something. You see where you can step out a bit of your normal range of choices. That's what the release is all about. You begin to see more choices than you had previously conceived.

Get to know your own mind. Part of being sensitive to the mind is knowing what state it's in, and part is knowing what techniques work for encouraging it and for calming it. Trying old strategies from the past might work now, too, or maybe they won't. Test and watch for a while to see what might work this time until you can bring the mind to that point of equilibrium where the door to freedom opens.

Broad, Tall, & Deep

October 6, 2010

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

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

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

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

Two, it also gives you a place to stand where you can simply be aware of whatever comes up. Sometimes things will come up in the meditation and

you won't be sure whether they're good or bad, so you want to be able to step back and say, "Let's just observe these things for a while." A larger observer is a really good place to go, because it helps remind you that when you're going to watch something, you want to watch it 360 degrees. You want to look all around you, from every angle, especially when something comes up in the mind and you want to see its effects. You want your awareness to be as broad as possible.

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

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

You want to develop that kind of goodwill, a goodwill that nothing can evaporate away. You want your goodwill not to be dependent on other people's being lovable or nice. When you can do that, it's not a case of your giving them something they don't deserve. You have to remember that you benefit from your goodwill. You want to make sure that goodwill informs all of your intentions, all of your motivations, so that you don't end up creating

a lot of unskillful kamma. When we talk about limitless or immeasurable goodwill, it doesn't mean just that there are no outside limits to it; it also means that there are no conditions placed on it. Whenever it's appropriate, that's what you act on.

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

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

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

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

then when it really hits, you won't have any tools to keep yourself from being overwhelmed by it.

So you consciously use the breath to induce pleasurable sensations wherever you can in the body. In the beginning, this will be just in certain areas of the body, certain channels of the body that you can get comfortable, so focus on those. As they become more and more pleasurable and more and more connected, then further connections will develop, and then more connections and more, until you've got the whole body connected with a sense of ease. You'll come to recognize for yourself the tone that feels easeful throughout the body, and you can go right there. At first it may not be very intense, but if you stick with it, it'll have a chance to grow.

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

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

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

As for making it tall or high, the Buddha compares discernment to going up on a tower and looking down on the world below, seeing all the concerns of human beings as they scurry around. When you're looking at them from way up high, they all seem so small. If you can learn to look at your own

everyday concerns in the same way, you've heightened the mind. This is one of the terms they use, adhicittam, which means that you raise the level of the mind. You've got a higher level of pleasure as your standing point: the pleasure of form. Then you look at the pleasure of sensuality and see that it's got lots and lots of drawbacks. You look at your everyday issues concerning this person or that project or whatever, and you see them in the context of the larger scheme of things. The vision the Buddha had of the whole cosmos on the night of his awakening was a way of heightening the mind, and—from that heightened perspective—understanding the principle of action.

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

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

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

As for deepening the mind, the Buddha usually uses "deepening" to refer to arahantship, the point where the mind is so deeply rooted that it's like a stone column sixteen spans tall, eight spans buried in the rock of a

mountain. As for the eight spans above ground, no matter how strong the winds come from any of the eight directions—these are the winds of gain/loss, status/loss of status, praise/criticism, pleasure/pain—the stone column doesn't shiver or shake.

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

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

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

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

have a really secure hold on it, the simple fact that you can have that concept and revert to it when you need it helps get you over and around a lot of difficulties.

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

Full Attention

December 29, 2011

Ajaan Suwat used to call this place our quiet corner here. We're literally at the end of the road. Our neighbors are mainly coyotes, bobcats, a few overly friendly dogs, and just a few other people. It's a great place for physical seclusion. You sit out under the trees, you open your eyes, and there are no human beings around at all.

You want to use the physical seclusion to bring about a state of mental seclusion as well. For most of us, if you took a picture of the baggage we brought here, we'd be surrounded. Issues of the family, issues at work, all the issues that we tend to talk to ourselves about, if they were actual bags, would be piled so high you couldn't see past them.

You want to learn how to cast those away. Remind yourself that whatever issue may come up in life, you're going to need mindfulness, you're going to need alertness, along with good powers of concentration and discernment. So the responsible thing right now is to let go of all your other responsibilities and work on these qualities. The future is very uncertain, but what is certain is that you're going to need a trained mind in order to deal with it.

If you find yourself chattering to yourself about this, that, or the other thing, remind yourself that's not what you're here for. No matter how important or pressing the issue may be, the training of the mind is more important and more pressing.

We try to work on what the Buddha said is our ancestral ground" the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, mental qualities in and of themselves. In other words, stay with just what you've got here right now on its own terms—not the body in the world, or the feelings in the world—and try to keep your thoughts within that space. If you find yourself chattering to yourself about things outside of this space, remember what happens to the quail or the monkeys that go away from their own ancestral territories: They get caught. The quail gets caught by the hawk; the monkey gets caught by human beings.

In other words, the mind doesn't have a chance to develop its independence, to develop its own well-being, to look after itself. So as soon as you find your mind wandering off to these things, come right back. This is where the real work is right now.

Of course, a very good way of making the present moment attractive is to try to keep it as comfortable as possible. When you work with the breath, don't let it get mechanical. Try to be sensitive, really, really sensitive to each breath as it comes in, each breath as it goes out. Try to notice where in the body you're most sensitive to the variations of the breath. For some people, it's the area in the chest. For others, it's in the throat or around the neck. Especially if you've been trying to spread breath energy around the different parts of the body, there's a tendency to squeeze off the most obvious parts so that you can pay attention to the less obvious parts, and that's not helpful. Work with the most obvious parts first and be really sensitive to them. What quality of breathing do you need? How long, how wide? How much do you want to push the breath into different parts of the body, and to what point does the pushing become counterproductive?

Try to take each breath on its own terms. Remember that what you're doing here is healing both for the body and for the mind. When your nerves feel frazzled, allowing comfortable breath energy to flow through the nerves is one of the best things you can do for them. Ajaan Lee calls this the cool fire of jhana, the cool fire of concentration. Hot fire, of course, covers all the issues you deal with that come in through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, thoughts about past and future. As those things go through your nerves, they're like a hot fire. They can fry your nerves, whereas the cool fire of jhana cools things down, gives them energy: a cooling energy, a nourishing energy. The more you can give the present moment your full, cool attention, the more healing it's going to be.

Which is another good reason you want to cut off any thoughts that would pull you away from really being attentive to right here, right now. Even thoughts about how much longer the meditation is going to last: Just drop them. Good thoughts, bad thoughts, indifferent thoughts: Just let them go. Try to be really, really sensitive to the feeling of the breath right here.

That way, you've got all four frames of reference in one place. The breath, of course, is the body. The sense of ease and well-being and fullness that you can work with through the breath, that's feeling. The mind state

that stays focused here, that's the mind. Then, of course, there's the mental quality of mindfulness, along with all the other factors for awakening. The thinking here is the thinking that tries to analyze how well all this is going. You make adjustments and then evaluate how well it feels. If you sense that it would be good to experiment a little bit here or there, well, go ahead and do that. This way, you've got analysis of qualities, one of the factors for awakening right here. All the factors for awakening are right here, but you don't have to analyze the different qualities to figure out which is which. Just bring them all together for the time being. Make them one.

Give this your full attention because it deserves your full attention. The well-being of the mind, the well-being of the body in the present moment: This is your foundation. All the good things we want out of life have to come out of the well-being of the mind. If you start getting frazzled, feeling overwhelmed by events, the mind starts flailing around, and you're going to end up doing things and saying things that you later regret—things that are not helpful for yourself or for anyone else. This is why meditation is not a selfish thing. It's a gift to yourself and to the people you live with.

So give it your full attention so that you can do it really well. Don't let things get put on automatic pilot. As soon as the breath is on automatic pilot, the mind will start wandering off again. So each breath deserves your full attention.

This quality of attention is one of the bases of success, or the bases of power—iddhipada as it's called in Pali. This is what gives strength to the meditation because it gathers in all your awareness, all your alertness, and brings it right here. When everything is fully alert right here, you can begin to sense connections you may not have seen before.

When the Buddha talks about meditation, he doesn't divide it between tranquility and insight, or concentration and discernment. These things all develop together right here because you're giving the meditation your full attention. Your full attention is what makes the mind still and allows you to see things clearly. When you see there's an unskillful connection, you can just let it drop. So don't worry about dividing things up. Try to bring everything together, make it as one as possible, because it's out of the oneness that all good things grow. It's what gives extra value to the mind.

It's like going down to the market and discovering there's only one of a particular fruit that you want. You can imagine how much it might cost, as

opposed to having hundreds and hundreds of them overflowing the counters, in which case they'd be practically giving them away. If you want to give value to the mind, you make it one. Then, from that sense of oneness, all the good things spread out for yourself, for the people around you, the people you're responsible for, the people you encounter. If you keep your priorities straight like this, everybody benefits.

Levels of Truth

October 7, 2010

Close your eyes, focus on the breath, notice where you feel the breathing. You might start off with a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths to emphasize where in the body you sense the breathing process. Then ask yourself: Is it comfortable? If it feels too long, too heavy, too whatever, you can change. Adjust it a bit to see if shorter breathing might feel good, or gentler breathing might feel better, or heavier breathing, even deeper, or more shallow—there are lots of different ways you can adjust your breathing. Or you can just pose the question in the mind: "What kind of breathing would feel good right now?" each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, and see how the body responds.

Think of the breath as a whole-body process. It's not just air coming in and out of the lungs. It's the movement of energy throughout the body, throughout the nerves, throughout the blood vessels, with up to three levels of the breath. One is the in-and-out breath, the air coming in and out of the lungs. Then there's the subtler breath, the flow of energy that starts as soon as you breathe in and has already gone all the way through the body, through the blood vessels, moving through the nerves. You might want to check, to make a survey of the body, to make sure that all those channels are open, down the back, out the legs, in the front of the body, right down the middle, past the shoulders, down the arms, all around the head, down the legs, all the way to the feet. Any patterns of tension or tightness, allow them to relax so that the energy can flow easily.

Then there's another level of breath energy, the still breath. It's an energy, but it's not moving. Ajaan Lee talks about being able to access it right at the spot where the diaphragm meets the front of the rib cage. But there are lots of other spots in the body, too, where you may notice that things are very still. If you want, you can focus on those still points, and then think of that stillness spreading throughout all of the breath channels in the body. For that to work, though, you first have to go through the second level of breathing, where you're working through the patterns of tension,

combing them out, separating them out, loosening them up, so that when you focus on the stillness, everything is open. When you think about spreading it, all the channels are open and everything will go all the way out to the edge of the body.

If you can maintain that sense of stillness, fine. It's like tuning-in to different radio stations. All those different frequencies are going through the air right now. It's simply a matter of where you tune the radio, which level you're going to focus on. The blatant breath is right here, the subtler breath is right here, and the still breath is right here. They're all right here. It's simply a matter of focusing the level of your awareness, focusing the level of your sensitivity, so you can pick up on whichever level is appropriate. If the subtler ones are harder to focus on, stay with the blatant breath. But if you can manage the subtler ones, it's a good part of your repertoire.

See which ones you can stay with most consistently that allow the mind to have a sense of real stability and clear focus. If some of the subtle levels are too vague for you, you'll lose your focus, and you find the mind drifting off, so choose a level of breath energy that's appropriate for you right now. As for the other levels, you can leave them for later.

This is a common pattern throughout the Buddha's teachings. When he talks about right view, there are many levels of right view. They're all true—and they're all consistent with one another. The Buddha never taught convenient fictions. His levels of right view are there for you to choose as to which is appropriate to you for the task you face. It's like the truths of the different sciences: There are the truths of physics, the truths of geology, and the truths of biology, and they're operating on different levels. There is a connection, but the question is: Which do you need right now for whatever particular purpose you have? It's the same with the levels of right view.

There's the level of what's called mundane right view, in which you basically accept the principle of action, that your actions have consequences, not only in this life, but on into other lives, and those consequences are determined by the quality of mind you bring to the action, the quality of your intention. This level of right view is good for when you want to learn about what's skillful and what's unskillful in your day-to-day actions—and even what's skillful and unskillful in learning to get the mind to settle down. After all, meditation is a kind of kamma, a kind of action, so you want to do it skillfully. It's on this level that the Buddha talks about

beings, worlds, and most of our common everyday concepts. It's a very useful level to have on hand.

But he also has other levels of right view. There's the level of the four noble truths, where he doesn't talk about beings or worlds. He simply analyzes the problem of suffering. This is for use when your powers of concentration get better and you can start analyzing things simply in terms of stress, the mental movements that are causing the stress, and what to do so you can see those mental movements and see the stress, and learn how to put an end to the stress by putting an end to the cause or the causes.

The Buddha divides things up into four categories like this because there are different duties for each category. Stress is something that you want to comprehend. You want to be able to look at it, and watch it so you can understand how it comes, how it goes, what are the things that you like that involve stress, what are the drawbacks of liking those things? The Buddha talks about common, everyday stress, and then he moves on to an underlying analysis that he calls the five clinging-aggregates: form, feeling, perception, fabrications, consciousness. All these things are things that we cling to, and in the clinging there's going to be stress. That's something you want to comprehend. You want to watch as it's actually happening to understand how it's happening.

Then, in the course of performing that duty, you learn to see the cause of stress: what's arising together with the stress. The duty there is to abandon it once you see that this particular mental action, this type of perception, this type of attitude, this particular kind of desire, is bringing stress with it. You learn how to drop it. Again, you first have to see why you like it to begin with. Then balance it out with its drawbacks, so that you can develop a sense of dispassion.

Now the dispassion there is actually the third noble truth. The duty there is to realize it, to see it clearly, to witness it as it's happening.

The fourth noble truth is the path. The duty here is to develop it, all the qualities you need in terms of virtue, concentration, discernment. You don't just watch these things arise and pass away. You actively try to give rise to them, to maintain them, and to develop them. So these four truths are another level of truth. As the Buddha said, these are not other than what they seem. Now, we may misread them for a while, but when we actually see

them happening, we'll see that stress really is stress, the cause really is the cause, and so on down the line.

Then there's a third level of right view. Ajaan Mun calls it the level where all four truths become one. The Buddha doesn't give it a particular name, he just calls it the right view of seeing everything arising and passing away simply as stress arising, stress passing away. In this case, the four categories are reduced to one. That's because at that point the path has been developed and you only have one duty left, which is to comprehend everything to the point of dispassion. That's putting the duty of comprehension and the dispassion and the abandoning all together into one, because at this point you've developed the path all the way. There's no more developing that has to be done. This, too, is a level of right view, and this, too, is a truth appropriate at a very refined level of the practice.

Then there's the truth of nibbana, which is something beyond the four truths, beyond even that one truth of stress arising, stress passing away—though in nibbana itself there are no right views. As Ajaan Lee says, nibbana has no use for right views or wrong views. It doesn't need them at that point. It's the goal, it's not the path.

So the Buddha offers us as many levels of right view as they are appropriate for what we need to do. It's as if you're digging a well. You wouldn't go to an astrophysicist. The astrophysicists could tell you all kinds of truths about stars and quasars, but that's not what you want for the sake of the well. You'd want a geologist who could tell you where to look for water. Even if the truth of astrophysics or the truth of physics would be applicable as to why there is water there—from comets or whatever—that's not the level of analysis you need right now. You're looking for water, you want to dig a well, so you go to the geologists. It's the same with these levels of truths: Whatever duty is appropriate for what you need to do right now, that's the level of right view you want to focus on.

The Buddha didn't have any secret truths. As he said toward the end of his life, he was not a close-fisted teacher. He wasn't going to keep anything for the very end and didn't have secret teachings just for the inner circle. But there are levels to his teachings. They're all out there and available, and it's up to you to decide which is appropriate for you right now.

It's the same when you're focusing on the breath. The levels of the breath are all there, but which level of breath is it easiest for you to stay focused on?

Stay with that level. As your powers of concentration and mindfulness get stronger, then you can start working with the subtler levels. They're all true. The question is, which one is good for you right now? I.e., which one is beneficial and timely? This principle that the Buddha applied for right speech—that it be true, beneficial, and timely—applies to a lot of the other aspects of the practice as well.

So focus on whichever level is best for you and allow it to develop. This is how we take on the Buddha's teachings—which are always available. You can look up any of his teachings at any time: You have to learn how to make them timely for yourself by focusing on the teaching that's most appropriate for you right now. That right there requires some discernment, but it's an exercise in discernment, which is how your discernment grows.

Feeding on Feeding

November 11, 2011

There's a saying in Thailand that if you haven't suffered, you usually don't go to a monastery, or you don't go to stay. This is one thing we all have in common: We're here because we see that ordinary pleasures are not enough. We've all suffered in one way or another and we've said we've had enough of that. We want to get past our suffering. Some people have a certain pain in their lives, so that when that particular pain gets assuaged, they stop practicing. Other people see that the suffering is built into the way we live, the way we function, so the problem goes deeper than that. Those are the ones who stick around.

An important part of learning how to put an end to suffering is comprehending it. As the Buddha said, this is the duty with regard to the first noble truth. When you look at the way he defines the noble truth, you realize that the issue is not in learning the words, because he doesn't really define suffering, he just gives some examples and throws it back on you: Where is your suffering right now?

Then, at the very end, he says every form of suffering has something in common with all other forms. It's the five clinging-aggregates: the form clinging-aggregate, feeling clinging-aggregate, perception clinging-aggregate, fabrications clinging-aggregate, consciousness clinging-aggregate. People have often asked: Where did the Buddha get this analysis? Because you don't see it in any pre-Buddhist teachings. He mentions it in his first discourse, explains a little bit more in his second, and the people that were listening gained awakening.

What was he referring to? Someone once asked me, "Suppose you're looking at a tree. Explain the aggregates involved in the process of looking at a tree." That's a very Western kind of question. We think of philosophy as describing what happens when you look at something. In Indian thought, though, the basic action that they're always trying to explain was eating. I think this is one of the best ways of getting to know the aggregates: to see how the aggregates function in eating. This is a very integral part of the

experience we all have: We're hungry, we look for food. We've got a body: That's form right there. And the feeling of hunger: That's the feeling aggregate. We go looking around: That's fabrication. We find something, it looks good: again, the feeling aggregate. We remember we've seen things in the past that look good, so we have to run this against the other things we've eaten in the past, to see what it lines up with. This is the function of perception, the labels you have in mind, the things you recognize. You come across a red mushroom, it looks good, but you remember that red mushrooms are deadly, so you put it aside. Then you come across other things that may not look so good, but you remember, "This is actually good food." There's that Calvin and Hobbes cartoon where Calvin says, "Who was the first person who squeezed something out of a cow's udder and said, 'Boy, I want to drink that'?" Good question. But this is what we grew up on. The purpose of perception is to remind us that you can't always trust your first glance. You have to remember what's edible and what's not.

Then, of course, there's the question that once you found something edible, what do you do with it? There are a lot of things that require a lot of preparation. The Thai translation for fabrication fits in right here: prung taeng—this is what you do with food. You prung taeng it: You fix it up. That's what fabrication is all about: how you put things together, the activities that you engage in in order to make something edible. Consciousness, of course, underlies all these things. You're aware of the form or the feeling, or the perception, or the fabrication.

This is probably the best way to get a handle on the aggregates. These are the activities you engage in as you go around looking for food. This, of course, relates directly to the clinging part of the aggregates. The clinging also means the act of feeding: You're feeding off these activities. The body feeds off the food, but the mind gains pleasure out of these activities because it's found that this is how you survive, this is how you take in parts of the world and make them part of yourself. That's what eating is all about: taking what's not-self and making it self. The mind gets pleasure out of the feeling, and the perception, and the fabrication, the whole thing. You can sit here and fantasize about the food that you're going to fix tomorrow or the food you're going to eat tomorrow: It's all part of the same fabrication process. Even before we put the food in our mouth, we've fed off of the

anticipation, and there's an enjoyment that goes into actually fixing the food.

Of course, you realize that it's not always an enjoyable process. Sometimes you can't find the food that you want, or you come in at the end of the day and you're really, really, tired, and you've got to fix a meal, and there's no fun in fixing that kind of meal. Yet we keep coming back to these processes because we need them in order to eat.

This is why so much of the meditation goes against the grain, because the Buddha is asking us to reverse the process, to stop feeding off of these things, both the actual physical food and the enjoyment we get out of the processes around the act of eating. Instead of taking something that's not-self and making it self, he's having us look at these things that we've assumed to be self and reverse the process: Realize that it's not-self, not just the physical food you take in, but also the activities themselves.

But you can't jump straight from one side of the equation to the other, which is why we practice meditation. As you get the mind concentrated, you're learning how to use these aggregates in a somewhat different way: You make them a path. And in the process of bringing the mind into concentration, you're going to be dealing with the same aggregates: the form of the body, which is the breath; the feelings of pleasure and pain that you find in the breath; the perception of breath, with which you find that as you manipulate it, you experience the breath in different ways. Then, of course, there's the fabrication: If the breath doesn't feel good, what are you going to do to make it feel better? The same way if you don't like raw eggs, what are you going to do to cook them? Then there's the consciousness of all these things: All of this is your food on the path.

The Buddha makes that analogy very clear in his image of the fortress. Discernment is the wall of the fortress, covered with plaster so the enemy can't get any footholds or handholds on it. Mindfulness is the gatekeeper, who remembers, using perception, who's friendly and who's not, i.e., which activities are skillful and which ones are not. That way you let in the friendly people and keep out the unfriendly ones, the enemies. You act on your skillful intentions and you're mindful not to act on the unskillful ones. The soldiers inside are your right effort, and the food for the soldiers and the gatekeeper are various states of jhana. You gain a sense of well-being as you

fix the mind in the same way that you would fix food. As you feed off of that sense of rapture and pleasure, it gives you a lot of energy.

So the Buddha doesn't have you starve. He just teaches you a new way to eat—the difference here being that as you feed on the path and develop the qualities of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, these become strengths. Ultimately, they get so strong that they bring the mind to the point where it doesn't need to feed anymore. This is the part of the practice that really lies outside of our normal experience. Everything we experience up to this point is a kind of feeding. But to think of the mind that doesn't need to feed: That's something that really stretches the imagination. It's important that we learn how to keep our imagination stretched in that way. There is a possibility of a happiness that doesn't have to feed on anything at all, doesn't have to ingest anything, doesn't have to fix anything up. That's what we're aiming for.

So you might find it helpful to think of the aggregates in this way. These are the activities that go around feeding in all its various forms. These are the things we're going to have to learn how to let go of, but you can do it only by comprehending them: both by getting very familiar with how you go around feeding on pleasure in the normal way, and by learning how to train yourself to feed on pleasure in terms of right concentration. There's a passage in the Dhammapada saying that arahants have comprehended food. This is what it means. You've comprehended the aggregates; you've comprehended the act of feeding. When you get to the point where you don't need to do that anymore, then they say that your path cannot be traced.

Some people like to think about nibbana as a total wiping out of any kind of consciousness of anything. If that were the case, though, the Buddha wouldn't have described it the way he does: a path that cannot be traced. If it were a wipe-out, it would be very easy to describe. So it's good to get your imagination stretched a little bit and to realize that going beyond this process of feeding, which has been our source of pleasure for who knows how long, would be a good thing. After all, feeding has not only been a source of pleasure, but also a source of pain. To be in a position where you have to feed is painful. It's the Buddha's definition of suffering. You have to comprehend it. Ultimately, the only way you're going to fully comprehend it will be to go beyond it. And this is the only path that will take you there.

Feeding Frenzy: Dependent Co-arising

October 23, 2006

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

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

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

If you want to see these processes in action, you've got to watch in the present moment. So you create the world out of the breath, your inner sense of the body. Take the sensations you feel in the legs and the arms, etc., and try to fashion them into a basis for concentration, a place where the mind

can stay, that you can take as your dwelling. The sense of ease and fullness you can develop through the breath can help to alleviate your thirst. It gives you something good and nourishing to feed on.

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

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

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

Why does the mind feed on these things? Because it feels empty without them. Sometimes it feels lost without them, deprived of its bearings. We create our bearings for ourselves through our views, through our ways of doing things. What it comes down to is that we think we need these things

for our happiness. Without them, we feel lost. These are our means—we think—for obtaining pleasure. These attitudes are based on thirst: the thirst for sensuality, the thirst for becoming, or the thirst to destroy what we've got. But all these things are motivated by a desire for happiness, by a desire for well-being. The thirst in turn is conditioned by feelings of pleasure or pain or neither pleasure-nor-pain, a neutral feeling. And these come from sensory contact.

One way of understanding the processes in the mind is try to trace them back: Exactly what contact triggered them? Was there a thought? Was there a sound? Was there an idea that suddenly triggered you into creating these worlds? That's one thing you've got to look for: What are the triggers? Sometimes, you find, the triggers can be very small. But dependent co-arising digs deeper than that. It says that the issue is not just the contact. We come to sensory contact with a lot of preconceived notions, a lot of attitudes ready to pounce on things. This is why contact is not the beginning of dependent co-arising. Prior to contact you've got the senses, and prior to the senses you've got name and form. Name and form are crucial here, particularly name, for it includes feelings, perceptions, intentions, attention, and the contact among these things in the mind.

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

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

So to help strengthen the new way of giving attention, or the new way of developing intentions, the Buddha has you develop certain perceptions. You've probably heard of the three characteristics, but it's interesting to note that the term "three characteristics" doesn't appear in the Pali Canon. The Buddha talks about anicca, dukkha, and anatta, but he doesn't use the word for characteristic—lakkhana—to go along with them. He uses the word perception or mental label: anicca-saññā, dukkha-saññā, anatta-saññā. You learn to label things as inconstant, stressful, not-self. The other word he connects with them is anupassana, or contemplation: aniccanupassana. To contemplate is to look for these qualities in your experiences. In particular, you look at the raw materials that you ordinarily use to build your sense of yourself, to build your sense of the world, to see how they're inconstant. When the raw materials are inconstant, how are you going to build anything solid out of them? It's like building a house out of frozen meat. The meat seems solid, you can stack it like bricks, but it's going to melt. Who would want to live in a house like that? It's stressful. It's asking for disaster.

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

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

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

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

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

can cut through the hunger, the thirst, that would force you to create other worlds of being, other worlds of becoming.

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

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

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

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

Good Eating

July 31, 2008

You may have noticed that when babies come across something new, they don't engage in useless questions. They don't ask, "What is this? Does it really exist?" They look at it for a bit and then they stick it in their mouths. They know the important question is: "Is this good to eat?"

That's an important point to keep in mind, because that's what a lot of life is all about: eating. The Buddha starts out his questions to the novice: "What is one?" And the answer: "All beings subsist on food." That's how you create your identity, how you define yourself: as how you eat. So the question is, not, "Are you creating a true identity, or are you living a false identity?" In other words, the question is not, "Who are you?" The question is, "Are you eating well? Is the way you eat satisfying?"

Eating here, of course, doesn't mean just eating physical food. It also refers to consuming mental food. How do you find gratification in the mind? What ideas, what sensory contacts are really gratifying? It's in the course of trying to find gratification in your mental and physical eating that you develop a sense of who you are. If it's not gratifying, it's not that you've assumed a false identity, it's just that you've been eating in the wrong places or eating in the wrong way. So the question is not, "Who am I?" but, "How am I eating? And if I don't like the way I'm eating, how can I change?"

The Buddha has a lot of answers here. The question of "Who am I?" he says is a wrong question. It gets you tied up in a tangle of views, a writhing of views, a jungle of views, a thicket of views, and you can never work yourself free. But if you ask yourself, "Where am I looking for pleasure? Where am I looking for gratification in my life? How do I deal with this hunger I seem to have all the time?": Those are worthwhile questions. The Buddha's ultimate answer, of course, is nibbana. When you reach nibbana, there's no more hunger, there are no more questions, just total satisfaction.

But how do you get to that point of no hunger? You watch the mind to see how it's feeding. Where does it look for gratification? Does it look for gratification in the approval of other people? Does it look for gratification in

taking advantage of other people, or somehow beating them out? Proving that you're better than other people? That kind of feeding is junk food. It's harmful for you, harmful for the environment around you.

You want to look for a way of feeding that's totally harmless, that really does give some solid gratification. This is why the Buddha said that the beginning of wisdom is when you ask someone who knows, "What, when I do it, will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?" In other words, you're going to learn to feed off of your actions, and you try to feed off actions that give long-term gratification, rather than just a short, nice, burst of flavor in the mouth, and then lots of problems when the food gets down into your stomach and intestines.

The Buddha's basic answers to that question are: generosity, virtue, and meditation. A sense of gratification comes from generosity, realizing that you're able to share, you have enough to share. Even when you're materially poor, you can share your strength, you can share your knowledge, you can make a gift of your forgiveness—and the pleasure that comes from giving in these ways is good, solid food. You're not harming yourself; you're not harming anyone else. And it's the kind of pleasure that, when you think back on it, feels good. You get more pleasure out of it. It's like an investment that keeps yielding returns, a gift that keeps on giving.

It's not like a lot of your sensual pleasures—that is, once you've consumed them, that's it: That's all the pleasure you're going to get out of them. Often they bring pain in their wake. You think about the less than noble things you did in order to get those pleasures and you feel bad about that. Or if it's a pleasure you've had once, and you're not going to have it again, you regret the pleasure, you miss it. Those kinds of pleasures really hurt over the long term, but the act of generosity is something that you can feed on for a long time.

Recollection of generosity, recollection of the gifts you've given in the past, is actually a form of meditation. It's useful for the days when the meditation seems dry and you begin to wonder if you're ever going to get anywhere with the breath. You can think back, "Well, I do have these good things in my background, these good actions that I've developed in the past." That right there is food for the mind. It strengthens you. It gives you the conviction that you can do this, that you are a worthy person.

Virtue is also a good form of food for the mind. When you make up your mind that you're not going to harm yourself, you're not going to harm other people, and you stick to that promise that you make to yourself, you can look at your actions and see no reason for regret. You're creating a zone of safety around yourself. As the Buddha said, virtue is a type of gift. If you stick to your precepts in all situations, you're giving universal protection to all beings, and you have a share in that universal protection as well.

Recollection of your virtue is another form of meditation. It, too, is food for the mind. You can think back on times when you were tempted to break your precepts, and you said No. You realize you had the opportunity to harm somebody, and you might have gotten away with it, but you said No. Again, there's a great sense of self-worth that comes from that reflection. It gives you energy on the path.

Meditation itself is also food for the mind. You start out with thoughts of goodwill and spread them to all beings. It feels good to be able to wish that, realizing that there is a level of the mind where your happiness doesn't have to interfere with anybody else's happiness. You're looking for happiness inside, and you wish that all other beings can find happiness inside, too. When you think about their good qualities, that gives you energy to develop good qualities yourself. You feel good about the way you're feeding. You don't have to feed off of other people in a way that damages them, you don't have to go into denial that you've damaged them, you don't get tied up by regret. You're learning what it means to feed blamelessly.

Even more so when you get the mind into good, solid states of concentration. The Buddha actually compares these states to types of food. The first jhana, he says, is like water. The second and third jhanas are like rice and beans. The fourth jhana is like honey, ghee, butter. When you learn how to nourish the mind in this way, you find that the feeding is a lot more gratifying.

The question of "Who am I?" gets put off to the side. You find there will be a sense of "you" that develops around these practices, but it's secondary. Your main focus should be on the practices themselves, and the sense of well-being that comes from them. The sense of "I am" that develops around these: Eventually you're going to have to let that go.

In the meantime, though, you'll find there are skillful and unskillful identities that you can develop around this kind of meditation-eating too.

The skillful identity is simply: "Other beings can do this, why can't I?" As you see that you're able to do that, it gives you a sense of self-worth, responsibility, self-respect. The unskillful "I" you might develop around this is, of course, when you start comparing yourself to other people, telling yourself, "I'm better than these other people, I've got the first jhana, they don't have any jhanas"—as if the jhanas were like baseball cards you can collect. We're not in a feeding contest. If you learn how to feed skillfully, that, in and of itself, should be gratification enough.

So remember that the question, "Who am I?" is a useless question. "Have I taken on a false identity? Do I have a true identity?" Those questions are beside the point. The real question is, "How am I feeding right now? And do I feel gratification, do I feel real satisfaction in the way I feed? If not, are there better ways to feed?" Those questions are worth asking, and the Buddha has good answers. But the important thing is that you learn how to make those answers your own.

Chewed Up by Your Food

October 9, 2010

I read a story recently about a Siberian tiger that had gone out in search of a poacher. The poacher was found really badly mangled, and the forensic people went in to check out the case. They had to come to the conclusion that the tiger was actually stalking the poacher. Apparently, the poacher had wounded that tiger several months before, and now the tiger had come back to get its revenge.

It's a good cautionary tale. Often the things that we hope to feed off of end up feeding off of us. The places where we look for our happiness or nourishment tend to chew us up.

The Buddha says as much. He talks about how suffering boils down to the five clinging-aggregates. You've got the form clinging-aggregate, the feeling clinging-aggregate, the perception clinging-aggregate, fabrications and consciousness clinging-aggregates. The word for "clinging," upadana, can also mean sustenance. We try to feed off of these things. Particularly, we try to feed off the pleasure that these things have to offer. We look for pleasure in physical things, we look for pleasant feelings, pleasant perceptions, pleasant things to think about, or pleasant ways of thinking, pleasant things to be conscious of. That's where the mind looks for its sustenance. But the Buddha also has us reflect on the fact that we get chewed up by form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. So the places where we hope to feed end up chewing us up and spitting us out.

As Ajaan Suwat used to say, think about a sensual pleasure you had last week: Where is it now? Gone. And the memory of pleasure is not necessarily a pleasant memory. Sometimes all you can think about is that you're not going to get that pleasure back. Or you might start thinking about the things you did in order to get that pleasure, which were not necessarily skillful. That can eat at you. And our thoughts, as we've seen many times, can eat us up. Especially when we think about the stupid and thoughtless things we've done in the past, or ways in which we've suffered in the past.

It's funny how the mind can feed off of these things, even though they're unpleasant. Yet it goes back to them. It gets some miserable pleasure out of them, but then it ends up getting eaten up by these things as well. It's like eating infected food. You swallow it down, but then you're swallowing down the germs in the food, and they start eating away at your gut.

So, what do you do? One: You've got to learn how to eat uninfected things. Give the mind better nourishment—at the very least, the kind of nourishment that's not going to eat away at you. This is what the path is all about, because when we're practicing the path, we're taking those aggregates and relating to them in a new way. We're using them as a path. We still feed off of them, but we try to feed off of nourishing forms, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. We focus on the breath: That's form. We focus on the sensations of the body: That's form. We try to work the breath through the body so it gives rise to pleasant feelings: That's feeling. We have to hold the perception of breath and body and mind, because otherwise the mind will wander off into other worlds. You need to use perceptions to be mindful, to stay with the breath, to keep remembering it, so that you don't lose your frame of reference.

There's a very close connection between mindfulness and perception. You have to keep remembering, you have to stay with body, body, body, or breath, breath, breath. As it turns out, perception is related not just to mindfulness, but also to concentration. You hold one perception in mind. Here again, it's the perception of breath. At the same time, you're conscious of all these things.

You're taking the aggregates and putting them together in a way that makes them healthy. They turn into health food—the kind of food that doesn't turn around and try to feed off of you or chew you up, that actually strengthens you.

When the mind is concentrated, it settles down with the perception of breath, and you start thinking about the breath energy, and realize it goes throughout the whole body. As you breathe in and breathe out, the breath sensations can be detected anywhere in the body, if you're really sensitive. The breath energy permeates throughout the body, and you want to take that as a basis for allowing the pleasure that comes when the mind begins to settle down to spread smoothly, so that you're not squeezing, or pulling,

or pushing on the different sensations in the body, just allowing them to be. Let them develop a sense of fullness.

That pleasure is nourishing. It's not like the pleasure of sensuality, which, as they say in Thai, may be good for your mouth but bad for your stomach. The pleasure of form in concentration is a kind of food that is nourishing all the way through. So you've got the form and the feeling together with perception.

Then there's the fabrication, which thinks about the breath, works with the breath, evaluates the breathing, how well the pleasure is going, evaluates the point where the pleasure is full enough, so you don't have to evaluate much anymore, but just keep focusing on the breath sensations, and staying there with this expanded sense of awareness.

It's when you're nourishing the body with good breath sensations—and you're nourishing the mind by allowing it to settle down and expand so that it's not forced to run around worrying about this and finagling that—that the mind can do what it does best: simply be aware. This is a good food for the body, good food for the mind. It's nourishment.

The Buddha often compares this to medicine, in the same way that good food can be medicinal, good for your health. This kind of pleasure, this kind of nourishment, really does strengthen you. Sensual pleasure actually makes you weak, because the mind keeps looking for things to be a certain way, and gets upset when they're not that way, and develops all kinds of bad habits around its desire for pleasure. But if you develop the mindfulness, the alertness, the ability to direct your thoughts in the right direction, evaluate things in the right way, you develop the skills that are useful for finding a sense of well-being, finding nourishment even in difficult situations. That's strength right there: the ability to be independent, so that things outside don't have to be a certain way for there to be a sense of well-being in the mind.

This is how this good food develops the strengths of the mind: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. This way, the mind, more and more, can stand on its own two feet. And unlike the body, the mind—when it feeds off mental food, off the food of the path—eventually reaches the point where it doesn't need to feed anymore. With the body, you always need to keep it well fed. The mind, though, can reach the point where it grows independent of food. It's like the arahant whose path

can't be traced. As long as the mind is looking for food, you can trace its path as it goes checking its a trap lines. But when it no longer needs to feed, it's like the path of birds through space: It can't be traced. It's not feeding off of anyone, and nobody is feeding off of it. That's when the mind is really free.

It's hard to imagine because we're so used to feeding off of physical food and mental food. But it's good to open your mind every now and then to think about these possibilities. The more you're open to the idea, the more likely that the possibility really will become an actuality for you.

Always keep in mind it is possible to become totally free. This is the Buddha's guarantee, the guarantee of all the noble disciples. It's up to each of us to test that guarantee for ourselves.

Isolating the Aggregates

July 20, 2011

As the Buddha says, one of the rewards of concentration is that you get to understand the aggregates: what's form, what's feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness. You get to watch how they arise; you get to watch how they pass away. When you see them clearly, you can begin to see where you're clinging to them and how the clinging involves suffering. Only when you can pinpoint these things can you begin to let go. It's like having a room full of piles of stuff. Only when you sort things out can you begin to see which things have to be thrown away and which things should be kept.

One of the reasons why concentration helps this sorting out process is that you can see things clearly only when the mind is really still. Another reason is that you actually get hands-on practice in manipulating these things in the course of getting the mind to settle down in concentration. It's in the course of that hands-on practice that you can begin sorting them out.

It's like learning a physical skill—playing a musical instrument or dancing or learning a sport: You have to isolate your sense of the muscles you're using if you want to master the skill. If the skill involves jumping and you haven't been able to isolate the different muscles in your legs and the other parts of the body that you're going to employ, the jump is going to be clumsy. But as you get your own sense from within of which muscles are needed to make the jump graceful or make it go far or high, then you perform a lot better.

It's the same way with the meditation. We start out trying to focus on the breath and we put a lot of pressure on it, for fear that if we don't, the mind's going to slip away. Of course, a lot of the pressure on the breath has an effect on the circulation of fluids and energies in the body. You can create a lot of tension, a lot of tightness, a lot of discomfort doing it that way. Even all that tension and tightness doesn't prevent you from slipping off because there's more to concentration than just pressure. You've got all these other mental activities going on that you have to learn how to master as well.

Pressure on its own isn't going to bring everything to stillness. You need to understand your raw materials.

To deal effectively with the breath, you have to get a better understanding of how you're sensing the body from within. This means looking at it in terms of the properties that make up the aggregate of form—earth, water, wind, and fire—along with space and consciousness, or awareness. Ordinarily, when you breathe in, there's a feeling of pressure that you spread through the body. So when we say to spread your awareness through the body or to spread the breath through the body, your immediate reaction is to spread pressure through the body, but that's not going to get good results. In fact, it can create problems. You have to learn to separate these things out: Which sensations are the breath sensations that flow through the body without disturbing anything else at all, without exerting any pressure at all? If there's pressure, it's an affair of the breath element pushing the water element against the earth element. You have to separate those out, so that you're spreading only the breath.

As for awareness, that's not something physical, so why should your awareness create pressure in the different parts of the body? Again, you have to learn how to spread your awareness without pushing the other properties at all.

When you can start to separate these things out, it gets a lot easier to settle down and stay with the breath, realizing that the breath energy doesn't have to be penned in by anything, doesn't have to exert pressure on anything. It can flow smoothly, lightly, all through the body, instantaneously. You don't have to drag it through during the in-breath. You don't have to squeeze it back out with the out-breath.

Some people say "I try to breathe down through the body through the in-breath and I only get as far as the neck or only as far as the middle of the back before I have to start breathing out." Well, that's a misconception of the breath. You've probably been pushing some blood down there without realizing it—because there's an aspect to the breath that, as soon as you're aware that you've begun to breathe in, has already gone throughout the whole body. When you can learn how to detect that, it gets a lot easier to follow, to stay with the breath.

The same with feelings. We talk about giving rise to a feeling of pleasure with the breath, pleasure with the concentration. Where does it come from?

You can't push pleasure into the body. You have to realize that there are lots of little centers in the body, little sensation centers, and all you have to do is give them a little bit of space, and then a feeling of what seems like neutrality to begin with will actually become pleasurable—if you give it space, if you're not pushing and pulling it around too much. Then the more consistently you can maintain that sense of space, the greater the pleasure grows. Let it spread without pressure. It becomes rapture: a sense of refreshment, fullness. Sometimes it can get so intense that you feel like you're drowning. You're not. It's simply the fact that you're allowing these sensations to move through the body and the movement of the breath is not disturbing them. It's giving them space.

This means that sensations that you used to associate with the in-and-out breath are not happening. Now, some spot inside your mind may be setting up alarm signals, but you have to reassure it that everything is all right. The breath is still moving—it's still coming in, going out—but your old forced ways of breathing are not happening. When you learn that it was forced and unnecessary, you find that you can breathe in and out with a much greater feeling of rapture, fullness, and pleasure. It becomes something you can tap into at any time.

As you learn how to dissociate the breath from the pressure, dissociate your awareness from the pressure, you begin to see that what was holding you back from settling in properly was your original perception of the breath. Now that you've changed that perception, the new perception is what's helping to hold you comfortably in place. There's a mental label that just says, "breath," and there's a picture that goes along with the label. And as you've learned, some pictures about the breath are more conducive to concentration than others. So ask yourself: how do you conceive this process of breathing in the body? Can you readjust your perception, readjust your label, readjust your little mental picture in there to make it even more useful?

This is when Ajaan Lee advises you to think of all the pores in your skin opening up. When you focus really clearly and distinctly on that perception of the pores opening up, they really do open up. This is one of the ways in which the brain communicates with itself, communicates with the body: through these images. Bit by bit you're beginning to isolate out the act of

perception as you find perceptions that are more and more conducive to settling down: what the Buddha calls "calming mental fabrications."

That brings us to the aggregate of fabrication itself. These are the questions you ask yourself about the breath. Your intention to stay here is also a fabrication. Your intention to change the breath is a fabrication. The way you evaluate how things are going: That's a fabrication as well. The more clearly you can isolate these functions, the more skillfully you can do them.

Then there's consciousness, which is the awareness of all these things. Consciousness comes in different types. There's focused consciousness that spotlights specific sensations and mental activities, and then there's a background awareness that's already there throughout the body. When we talk about spreading your awareness, it's primarily a question of letting your spotlight concentration get in touch with the awareness already filling the body. This background awareness doesn't have to exert any pressure on anything at all. You learn how to separate this consciousness from, say, the earth and the water and the other things in the physical side of the body that you may have been confusing it with.

The more clearly you can isolate these things, the easier it is to figure out exactly what's going wrong when the mind is not settling down. You get more sensitive to any feelings, perceptions, or fabrications that might disturb your concentration. You get a better sense of how to handle those as well. In particular, you get more sensitive to that little process where there's a stirring somewhere in the body—which could either be physical or mental to begin with—but then you decide it's going to be a thought, so you place the label of "this is a thought about x" and then you allow it to grow in that particular direction. When the mind is really still, you can see this as it's happening. You can see it more clearly because you're intent on not allowing it to take over your concentration.

It's through your mastery of these different processes of the aggregates that you can actually get the mind to settle down—which is why when the mind has settled down you can see these processes even more clearly and are ready to evaluate them for what they are. You can see things in these terms because you've had direct experience in separating them out in the process of getting the mind to settle down to begin with.

It's worth noting that the five aggregates are not among the teachings the Buddha picked up from other schools of thought that were taught by his contemporaries. The terms for "form," "feeling," and so on were already current in his time, but the idea of grouping them together as a set was original with him. And it's very directly related to the mastery of right concentration.

Ajaan Lee points this out. He says that when you're dealing with the breath, you're dealing with form. As the form begins to get more and more subtle until the breath stops, the mind begins to focus on space. The ease that comes with that feeling of space is part of the aggregate of feeling. Then it goes to consciousness. That's the aggregate of consciousness. Then there's nothingness, and you begin to recognize that the sense of "there's nothing" is a fabrication. Then there's the state of neither perception nor non-perception, which allows you to see how attenuated perception can be.

There's an image that Ajaan Lee uses in another context, but it applies here as well. Think of a rock containing different minerals. As you apply effort to your concentration, it's like applying heat to the rock. When you hit the melting point for, say, tin or lead or silver or gold, each of those metals in the rock will flow out and separate on its own. You don't have to go sorting through the rock with a pick, saying, "This is a little bit of gold and this is a little bit of silver." They naturally separate out as you apply the heat.

In the same way, the activities of the aggregates all separate out as you get deeper and deeper into the formless stages of concentration. Now, the teachers of the Buddha's time were able to get into these stages, but he seems to have been the first to realize how useful it was to take these terms, the ability to separate out these processes, and run with them further.

This is why, when you've been practicing concentration and you're beginning to look at the issue of suffering, you begin to see more clearly how clinging to these five aggregates is what brings suffering about. You're clinging to any one of these five activities or any combination of them—because they are activities. We call them aggregates, which makes them sound like a pile of gravel, but they're not. They're just different conglomerations of activities or processes. When the mind has been in concentration, you can begin to see, "This is where there's stress," say, around aging, illness, death, birth, or wherever else the mind feels stress. The stress is there because you've been clinging to these different activities.

This means that you shift your focus away from the aging or whatever, and direct it toward watching these activities in action—the same activities you've been engaging in to get the mind to settle down. The more clearly you can see these activities and their direct connection to suffering and stress, then the easier it is to let them go.

So when you find yourself running up against problems in the meditation—a sense of discomfort in the body or some sloppiness in maintaining your focus—ask yourself: Which of these activities have you not been able to isolate out? Which ones are you confusing or glomming together in an unskillful way? The more easily you can isolate them, then the more efficient your concentration is going to be, the more solid it's going to be, and the better it's going to be as a foundation for gaining even deeper insights.

Sensuality

January 26, 2012

Two big enemies of concentration are sensual desire and ill will. It's all too easy—as you're sitting here putting aside your duties of the day, your various responsibilities, and you create an empty space here in the present moment—that these are the thoughts that come flooding in: the sensual pleasures you'd like to fantasize about. When the Buddha talks about sensuality, it's not so much the pretty things out there, or the nice sounds, or the good tastes, or whatever, it's our obsession with thinking about these things, mulling them over and over in the mind. It's a peculiar fascination, because you don't get any nourishment out of it. You can think about delicious food all day, but it doesn't nourish you.

The same with ill will: The mind settles down and is still for a minute, and then you suddenly think about the people who have harmed you, the injustices you've been subject to. Even though it's not a pleasant thing to think about, the mind feeds, feeds, feeds on these things, perhaps out of a sense of self-justification. After all, that person really did do those horrible things, and you'd like to see him or her get what's coming to them. You're totally in the right, but wanting to be in the right this way totally destroys any opportunity for the mind to settle down, to be at ease, to have a sense of solid foundation here in the present moment.

So you've got to learn how to think about the drawbacks of these things. Ill will is the easier of the two, because we all know what happens with ill will. People get into arguments, they get into fights: All the strife in the world, the suffering is obvious. It's easy to look at ourselves when we're really angry at somebody, or have a lot of ill will and see that the mind is on fire. It's not a pleasant place to be.

The drawbacks of sensuality, though, are harder to see. This is where the mind gets really resistant to the Buddha's teachings on putting aside sensuality, learning how to practice renunciation. He tells you to look at the drawbacks of sensuality, but we find fault with him for doing so. Someone once complained to me: Why is the Buddha focused so much on the negative

side of sensuality? It's because we tend to focus so much on what we see as the positive side, all the pleasure we get out of thinking about these things. But that, too, gets in the way. As these thoughts come into the mind again, and again, and again, they create ruts. From thinking, it tends to go to action: words you say, things you do. So it's often useful to stop and think about all the stupid things you've done under the influence of sensual desire, to realize that there must be a better way of finding happiness, and there must be a better kind of happiness.

Of course, one of the best ways of undercutting that fascination with sensuality is to develop an alternative kind of pleasure, like the pleasure of concentration. It's almost like we're faced with a Catch-22: If you're fascinated with sensuality, it's hard to get into concentration, and if you can't get into concentration, then it's hard to really pull yourself away from sensuality. But you can chip at this bit by bit. This is one of those areas where you want to use your wisdom and discernment to develop concentration. It's the theme of one of Ajaan Maha Boowa's books. In fact, his book of meditation instructions is entitled, Discernment Fosters Concentration.

You have to think about these things for a bit to realize the drawbacks of sensuality, realize the advantages of finding a happiness inside, even when you haven't fully tasted how really good the pleasure of concentration can be. You want to open your mind to that possibility and use that as a motivation, realizing that there must be something better: a totally harmless pleasure in which you don't get intoxicated; you can see things clearly.

One of the immediate drawbacks of getting tied up in sensual thinking is that your mind gets dulled, and you don't see things for what they are. You see things from only one side. It's a pleasure that blinds you. Whereas the pleasure that comes from concentration helps foster clear seeing, clear vision, all-around seeing, all-around vision.

Again, think of all the trouble that people get into over sensuality. You think of anger as being a big cause of the harm that people do to one another, but where does the anger come from? Usually from thwarted sensual desires. As the Buddha points out, in order to acquire and maintain your sensual desires, you've got to work really hard, and sometimes your work fails. Or it succeeds, and then people run off with the results of your

work. It's because of sensual desires that people get into quarrels within the family, between families, between nations.

Then there's the whole element of fear. One of the reasons we're afraid of dying is from fear of losing our sensual pleasures. We think of our sensual thinking as a gift to ourselves, and you have to learn how to realize that it's not.

A lot of this has to do with, of course, the advertising industry. There are those chocolates that come with little bits of chocolate wisdom written inside the wrappers. Chocolate wisdom tends to be, "Take another one, indulge yourself, be nice to yourself, give yourself more cholesterol problems."

Even without the advertising industry, though, you have that way of thinking when you're feeling really miserable and you tell yourself, "Give yourself an ice cream cone, give yourself some food, give yourself something sensual to make yourself feel better." This is one of the ways our parents made us feel better as kids, so we tend to indulge ourselves in that way. You have to ask yourself, especially with the advertising, exactly why are they giving us this bit of chocolate wisdom? So that we'll buy more of their chocolates. They don't really care about our health. They don't care about our well-being. All they care about is getting our money in their hands.

You think of all the politicians who trade on fear. They get away with that because of our attachments to our sensual pleasures. They raise the specter of war, they raise the specter of unemployment and poverty, and push through all kinds of horrible legislation based on that. As long as we're attached to sensual pleasures, we're going to be susceptible to their fear-mongering. Think about it. If you weren't attached to sensual pleasures, what would you have to fear? Nobody could prey on your fears. You'd be more independent. Safer.

This element of independence is really important, because a lot of our sensual pleasures depend on other people, and they have the right to withdraw those pleasures if and whenever they want. Even if they don't want to, they die and they leave us. As the Buddha said, it's like going around with borrowed goods. They could be taken back by the owners at any time.

In fact, one of his instructions for talking to someone who's about to die is that you ask them, "Are you worried about your family?" Then you remind

them, "Well, whether you're worried about them or not, it's not going to help them. Let go of that worry."

Then: "Are you concerned about leaving sensual pleasures?" The answer usually is Yes. So the technique is to get the person to think about more refined sensual pleasures. The pleasures of the devas are a lot better than human pleasures. They look at human sensual pleasures the same way we would look at dogs' sensual pleasures. So think about heavenly sensual pleasures. When you think about heavenly sensual pleasures, they can go up many different levels. Each level gets more and more refined. You finally get to the point where you realize that even the sensual pleasures of heaven have their end. When you fall, it's going to be a hard fall. So you try to wean your mind from sensual pleasures.

That's the advice. Of course, if you wait until you're dying to think about it, it's not going to have much impact, because the mind doesn't know where to go. But if you can think that way now, realizing that you've got to find a better, more solid source for pleasure, you can focus on the skills of meditation and be better prepared when the time comes.

One of the issues, of course, is that people think that, in denying sensual pleasure, denying that it's a good thing, we're going to have to wear hair shirts and make ourselves suffer. In fact, the Buddha himself made that mistake when he was looking for awakening. He thought that if you wanted to get away from your attachments to sensual pleasures, you'd have to inflict pain on yourself. He finally realized, though, that that didn't work. Then he realized that there's another way to free yourself from sensuality, not through pain, but through a better kind of pleasure, starting with the pleasures of concentration.

So it's a trade. You're trading chocolates for gold: the pleasure that comes from settling down with the breath, and working the breath energy through the body, the working around any sense of blockage you might have here or there so there can be a sense of real fullness in the body. You breathe in, and all the different parts of the breath energy in the body are working together. They're energizing one another. You realize that by allowing the mind to stay right here it is possible to develop a sense of well-being that you can't get by thinking about pleasures of sight, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. This goes deeper and it's totally harmless. You're just sitting

here, aware and breathing. Even though this isn't the ultimate happiness, the ultimate well-being, it's the way there. It's how you get there.

Now, you will have to put up with some pain. There's the pain of sitting in meditation, and there's the pain of having to say No to things that you've been saying Yes to for who knows how long. That's why we have to keep on using our discernment to foster our concentration, to keep on reminding ourselves that we're heading in a better direction, and that we have to make a trade.

Our problem, especially here in the West, is that we all want our cake and enlightenment, too. You have to realize you can't hold on to the cake and gain the enlightenment, you've got to learn how to let go of the cake, let go of the chocolate, because some pleasures get in the way of more worthwhile ones.

It's not that pleasure is bad—and that's one way the mind has of defending its attachment to sensuality, is to say, "Well, what's wrong with pleasure?" Actually, there's nothing wrong with pleasure, but there are better pleasures, more lasting, less harmful, more satisfying pleasures. Remember that it was when the Buddha realized that there is a pleasure that is blameless, the pleasure of concentration, that's when he got on the path. This was after avoiding pleasure for years.

We can learn from the lesson that he won the hard way, that some pleasures are better than others. And although the pleasure of concentration takes work, you're going to be much better off for having worked at it.

This is why there's a very direct connection between right resolve and right concentration. Right resolve is the resolve for renunciation of sensuality, and concentration gets into right concentration when you can put aside sensuality, put aside unskillful mental qualities, and stay with the breath.

So sometimes, when you're sitting down to focus on the breath, it helps to reflect first on the fact that you're headed toward a better pleasure, a wiser pleasure. That makes it easier to put aside the obstacle of sensuality, at least for the time being, so that you can really give your full attention to the breath, to the sense of the energy of the body as you feel it from within, and give it a chance to grow.

Transparent Becoming

December 8, 2007

The mind is used to wandering around. That's what the word samsara means. It's not a place; it's an activity. It's something you do. For most of us, it's a matter of going from one desire to another desire. Then either you get what you want and then you say, "Okay, enough of that, let's move on to something else," or if you realize you won't get it, then you move on to something else to make up for the lack.

The mind is on a constant move, creating what's called bhava, which literally means "becoming" or "being." It's better, I think, to translate it as "becoming," because the process is dynamic. It's not like Being, as a static metaphysical absolute. It's becoming something, going somewhere. You actually create the where through your focus on a particular desire, a particular craving. It's something we do all the time, both on the cosmic level, as we go from one life to the next, and also on the immediate level, as we're sitting here focusing on one object, losing interest, and then focusing on something else. And, in the focus, we create a world or a very particular experience of the world.

There's an allegory that the Buddha tells at one point in the Canon of how the cosmos goes through many cycles of expansion and contraction. When it contracts, the beings either go to the very highest heavens, which are not destroyed, or to the very lowest hells, which are not destroyed, either. Then, as the cosmos begins to expand again, some of the beings in the highest levels start coming down. They're born in this world, which, at the time, is not like the world we know it at present. The beings themselves are self-luminous; they glow, and they travel through space.

The world itself is nothing but water. It's like the story of Genesis with God brooding over the waters, but in this case, instead of brooding or creating a world the way God did, they each create their own worlds. A film begins to form on the water, called savory earth. According to the description, it has the color of really good ghee or really good butter, and the taste of pure wild honey. One of the beings, simply out of curiosity or just

plain wantonness, decides to check it out. He takes his finger and tastes it, and it's so good that he immediately sets on it and starts gobbling it down. The other beings follow suit. As they do this, their craving becomes focused on the film of savory earth. As they gobble the stuff down, they start losing their self-luminosity; they no longer glow. As soon as they stop glowing, the moon and the sun appear, days and nights appear, along with seasons and the passage of years. It gets closer and closer to the world as we know it.

You can take the story as an allegory. This is what happens when you focus your craving on something. You change, and the world around you changes, too. You see this clearly with addictions. If you get addicted to a particular drug, all of a sudden everything in the world relates to that drug. As they say, when an alcoholic goes into a house, he pretty quickly knows where the alcohol is kept in the house. Other people walk into the same house and they would never know, because their craving is focused on something else. As you get focused on a particular thing, your mind begins to narrow down, especially if its focus is on an unskillful kind of craving. So it's through your craving that you create a focus around which you have an experience of the world, you have an experience of yourself, you define yourself and the world through your craving: That's bhava.

The thing about the mind is that it can move from one bhava to another, one becoming to another. You can also try to destroy bhava. Sometimes we hear about putting an end to further becoming, and we think that we have to destroy what we've got, and there are so many ways people do that: either through really self-destructive behavior, or through meditating and coming to the conclusion, "I'll have no desires, I'll have no wants at all, I'll just accept whatever comes." What happens is that they start creating a new self around the one who's just trying to be there, still, equanimous. In other words, in the desire to destroy one bhava, you create a new one. The problem with the new self or the new bhava is that it's underground. You don't see it. Which is why the Buddha says that the desire for no becoming is also a cause for further becoming.

So he recommends another way out, which starts with creating a skillful kind of becoming, where the process of becoming is transparent. You can see what it is and how it happens. And that's what we're doing now as we meditate, as we develop a state of concentration in the mind. You've got that one focus on the breath. In the beginning, you need to have craving to do the

practice properly. And for the craving to get activated here, you have to make the breath interesting. This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath energy. When you start getting in touch with the way the energy moves around your body in relation to the way you breathe, in the relation to your reaction to events around you, it can get really fascinating.

This is why it's important, when you meditate, that you don't have too many hard-and-fast rules about how you're going to explore the energy in the body. You want to follow your interest, because otherwise the mind is not going to want to stay. If it feels tied down, it's going to start squirming, and it's going to find another focal point for its craving. It'll want to create a different world, but a world that doesn't have the same clarity.

So you do what you can to keep the mind here. In some ways you can force it by being strict with it, not allowing it to go wandering off. But that kind of strict parenting, if it's not tempered with love and understanding, is going to create a problem child. You want to be more understanding, understand what your mind is interested in right now: What's alluring right now? What aspect of the energy in your body is interesting?

Or if you have trouble staying with the breath, what other themes do you need to think about right now that will help you get more settled down? Sometimes when you're feeling anxious or scattered, it's helpful just to think buddho in the mind—bud- with the in-breath, dho with the out—without paying too much attention to how the breathing feels. Just give the mind something to stay with. Or if you're feeling discouraged in the practice, think about other people who have had problems in the practice and yet were able to get through them and come out on the other side. If you're feeling lazy, you can think about death. It could come at any time. Are you ready to go? If not, get to work. If you find yourself pulled to lustful thoughts, you can think about what you've got inside your body, and what that other person has inside his or her body.

In other words, there are no hard-and-fast rules about what you should be focusing on. Or, even if you're focused on the breath, there are no hard-and-fast rules about where you should focus.

This is a common theme in the forest tradition. Ajaan Mun didn't have an Ajaan Mun meditation technique, and he didn't create a lot of rules about how it had to be done. He'd give his students a topic and then send them off, leaving it up to them to figure out how they'd get their minds to settle down

around that topic. With a lot of time out in the forest, you could experiment, find out what you found engaging, find out what helped you settle down—whether it was simply the desire to give the mind some rest and some peace, or if you had to convince it of the need to settle down by thinking about all the dismaying aspects of being stuck in this process of samsara. Whatever pulled you into the present and helped you stay there: As long as it worked, it was Dhamma.

This is the attitude you should bring to the present moment. Some people say, "You want to practice concentration? Well, try not to have craving, try not to be attached." But you've got to have craving; you've got to be attached if you're going to have that focal point where the mind is going to stay, and be willing to stay, be happy to stay, to get pleasure out of staying.

So try to take an interest in the breath. Give yourself reasons to stay. If the mind gets bored, give it variations in the breath, variations in your focal point. There are lots of ways you can stay with the breathing, lots of ways you can conceive the breath process in the body. Some things we can learn from tai chi or Chinese teachings on chi, on how it's supposed to flow. There are other things we can learn on our own. Experiment. Whatever you find congenial, whatever you find satisfying, if it helps the mind stay with the body in the present moment with a sense of well-being, that's Dhamma. The more you bring your own ingenuity to the practice, the more it becomes your practice—not some foreign thing that's imposed on the mind, but a way of getting in touch with what's going on in your very own mind, and learning how to nudge it in skillful directions.

Learn to use your ingenuity, and use your powers of observation to see what works. Those were probably Ajaan Fuang's two most common instructions: Be observant. Use your ingenuity. Play with the breath, he would say. Play, not in a lazy, lackadaisical way, but the way a serious athlete would play at a particular sport, wanting to master it, wanting to do it well, up for the challenges that are presented by trying to learn from what's going on in the body right now, learn from what's going on in the mind right now. This way, you create a skillful form of bhava where the process of becoming becomes transparent. That's what lays the foundation for you to really see, and to see through the process, so that you can ultimately get to something beyond.

Cutting New Paths in the Mind

October 10, 2011

When we're taught to meditate, there's so much emphasis placed on being in the present moment, not wandering off to the past and not wandering off to the future, that we tend to neglect a very important part of right effort, which is to prevent unskillful qualities from arising. To prevent these things, we have to anticipate them. We have to recognize that there are certain patterns of behavior that we tend to fall into, ways in which we're really quick to stab ourselves: thoughts of shame, thoughts of inadequacy, fear, feeling threatened very easily. There are lots of ways in which we bring unnecessary suffering onto ourselves, and they tend to be very quick. They're like paths in the mind over which we've walked back and forth many, many times. There's nothing in the way, we've killed all the grass, we've cut back all the bushes. We've been back and forth so many times that now we can just run right down those paths, find the arrows at the end of the path and stab ourselves with them.

When you recognize you have these patterns, you have to learn how to anticipate them, to counteract them, so that they don't arise—or if they do arise, you can let go of them quickly. That's what this aspect of right effort is all about. And it does require planning, thinking about past and future. You want to be able to observe the mind: What kind of thoughts has it engaged in that bring on that ability to stab yourself? What's the line of thought, what's the reasoning, what's the agenda behind those patterns of thinking? Then, very deliberately, sit down and think in other ways, learn how to counteract whatever the reasoning there may be behind them so that in the future you don't fall into those patterns.

To do that, you need to break these things down into manageable bits.

Last night I heard someone talking about how she'd been on a retreat and had been dealing with the large archetypes in her mind. Perhaps the retreatants had been told that they were dealing with archetypes so that they could have a sense that they were doing important work. But when you think of patterns in your mind as being archetypes—i.e., parts of the

collective unconscious, things that are built into the human mind—it makes these things loom really large, much larger than you. That makes it very easy to be overcome by them.

So remember: These are not archetypes, they're patterns. They may be patterns you may have in common with lots of other people, but they're simply a series of a habits, and you want to learn how to recognize them as specific habits, specific choices that you make. When you cut them down to size this way, then they're more manageable. You can take them out one by one by one. But if you let them remain archetypes... I've heard that Jung had images of archetypes carved into stone and placed around his house. That's a good symbol for what a lot of people do with their patterns of behavior: They carve them into stone and they can never get rid of them that way. If you realize that they're a series of choices and patterns of behavior—these pathways in the mind that you've been running up and down, up and down, up and down—it means you can choose other paths, paths that don't lead to a briar patch, don't lead to lots of thorns and arrows. Cut new paths across them and very deliberately think in other ways.

At first it may seem awkward, but as you learn to think in opposite ways, after a while those opposite ways seem more and more natural. For instance, you realize that you've done something wrong, you've hurt somebody, and there's a sense of shame, a sense of embarrassment. Okay, recognizing that it was a mistake is an important skill you have to develop, you have to maintain, but burning yourself up around it is not going to brand it into your mind. What often happens is that when those thoughts become very painful, you try to deny them, to bury them away. The more painful they are, the more they get buried—and of course, the more they get buried, the harder they are to deal with. They don't really help you. You want your memory of your mistakes to be near at hand but not so painful that you can't pick it up.

Just make a mental note, "That was a mistake; I shouldn't have done it that way," and then sit down very deliberately and think about what an alternate way of handling the situation might have been. That way, the shame becomes a useful quality of mind. It's no longer an unskillful quality. It's part of your skillful process of learning.

In each case, you recognize that you've got these habits, so you've got to sit down and deliberately counteract them. Otherwise, they turn into

something way too big, way too contentious. They're the kind of thinking that the Buddha calls papañca, where you identify yourself, "I am this kind of person. I am the thinker, and the thinker has these habits, and the thinker has these needs." As soon as you take on that identity of being a being, you have to feed. Your sense of identity has to be fed with certain thoughts, certain ideas. It just grows bigger and bigger and bigger. It's going to conflict with other people's sense of their identity and their food sources. These things just get too big to deal with.

This kind of thinking is called objectification. You turn yourself into a particular type of object. You're this being, with these habits, these archetypes established within you. Sometimes papañca is translated as "proliferation," where your thinking multiplies and runs riot, but it's not really the amount of thinking that's causing the problem, it's the type of thinking, the type of thinking that makes you bigger and more solid than you have to be. You become a being with all these needs that have to be fulfilled.

The Buddha's approach is to learn to take all this apart. Remember those questions that he said don't deserve asking, or don't deserve attention: "Who am I? What am I? Am I good? Am I bad?" Get the question of identity out of the way, and simply look at, "What kind of habit is this? Is this a useful habit? Do I really want it?" You may know very well that you don't want it, but it keeps coming back, coming back, so you say, "I've got to face it and deal with it, to deal with it as a habit."

Learn how to question it. If you can't come up with good arguments against following that kind of habit, or falling in line with the reasoning that drives that habit, at least learn to put question marks in, when it says, "This is this and that's that." Ask yourself: "Is that really true?" It's so easy to make yourself miserable over what you perceive that someone has said or done, or what someone represents, only to find out later that what you perceived wasn't the case at all.

So learn how to insert some question marks in the rush of those thoughts. Break them up a little bit so that when the impulse comes to follow your old habits, you've got some alternative ways of thinking, alternative ways of breathing, alternative ways of picturing the whole situation to yourself. You've also got alternative ways of relating to these

patterns: Instead of thinking of them as being large archetypes, or part of your identity, they're simply a series of habits.

You can create new habits. It's like finding that the paths you've been following through the forest lead only to traps that are filled with spikes and snakes. Well, you can cut other paths through the forest that lead to better places: to springs, meadows, and lakes. It takes time. Sometimes you've got to cut through a lot of brush, but once you've made that first foray into the new path, then it's simply a matter of going back and forth, back and forth, back and forth over and over it again. Ideally, you'll get a path out of the forest. At the very least, if you're going to stay in the forest, you know the good places to go. You know where the water is, you know where shelter is, you know where the good medicinal and edible plants are, and try to blaze a path to those areas.

You're cutting your old habits down to size by cutting new paths through the forest. This is an important aspect of right effort, so that you don't keep stabbing yourself in the way you used to, or if you do find you're stabbing yourself, you can quit more quickly. You don't have to keep indulging in old habits.

That's one of the ways in which your right effort becomes all-around. Then you're not stuck with just one technique, the way the British were stuck in World War II. They thought the Japanese were going to attack Singapore from the sea, so they pointed all their cannons out toward the sea, and had them set in concrete. And sure enough, the Japanese came down the Malay Peninsula, and the cannons were useless.

Don't let yourself be stuck with cannons pointing in just one direction. You've got four directions to watch out for: learning how to prevent unskillful habits or unskillful qualities from arising, and if they have arisen, learning how to abandon them; learning how to give rise to skillful qualities, and how to develop and nurture skillful qualities when they have arisen. You want your right efforts to be all-around, because only that way can they give you all-around protection.

Skills of the Dhamma Wheel

November 10, 2009

Every time we chant the Sutta on Setting the Dhamma Wheel in Motion, I like to look at the Dhamma wheel up on the wall, the one my father made years back: It's going on 13 years now. It's got twelve spokes, which symbolize one of the passages in the sutta where the Buddha goes through the four noble truths and the three types of knowledge appropriate for each truth: knowing the truth, knowing the duty appropriate to that truth, and then knowing that you've completed that duty. Four truths, three levels of knowledge, three times four is twelve: That's the wheel in the Dhamma wheel. It should form the basic frame for the way we look at our practice. It's how we should frame our attention to things.

The Buddha never taught bare attention. He talked about only two kinds of attention: appropriate and inappropriate. When you attend to things, it's not really bare. The fact that you're noticing something, paying attention to something, means you have a purpose in mind. Even if you decide that you're going to pay attention to whatever pops up, regardless, there are still subtle choices going on. With many things happening all at once, you can't help but pay attention to one thing rather than another, and you can't help doing something about what you're paying attention to. There is a purpose, there is an intention, there is an activity that goes along with your attention. It's important, as a meditator, that you be very clear about this. Otherwise, if you think you've reached bare attention and you're told that that's a taste of awakening, a taste of the deathless, a taste of the unconditioned, you stop looking. You don't dig deeper to see, "Wait a minute, what's going on here? Is there an element of intention here? Is this fabricated or is it not?"

In one of Ajaan Maha Boowa's Dhamma talks he tells you to test everything, to be willing to destroy everything that comes up, because whatever is really true and really unconditioned is not going to be touched by your efforts to destroy it. Now the word "destroy" here means that you learn how to take it apart, question it, see if you can figure out how it's

formed, how it can be made to come and how it can be made to go. This goes for everything, including the act of attention itself.

There's always going to be an element of intention in the act of attention. When the Buddha places attention in the series of conditions in dependent co-arising, it's under the category of "name," mixed up with contact and intention and perception and feeling, and all of these factors have fabrication underlying them. So there's a lot going on even when you think you're just giving bare attention to something. One of your tasks as a meditator is to notice that, to ferret it out and to learn how to apply appropriate attention to what's going on. What makes it appropriate is that the perceptions related to it are framed in terms of the four noble truths and the duties appropriate to those truths—or, you might say, the skills appropriate to those truths.

That's because they're the activities the Buddha encourages you to apply to the different truths. Stress or suffering, he said, is something that you have to comprehend. To comprehend means to know it so thoroughly that you develop dispassion for it. We usually don't think that we're passionate for stress and suffering, but we really are. The things we generally are passionate about carry a lot of stress with them, but we just choose to ignore that fact. An important part of the practice is to make the effort to see how these things we love, these things we're passionate about, have that side to them: that stressful, suffering side. Then we keep focusing on that stressful side until we can develop a sense of dispassion for it.

The duty with regard to the cause of stress is to let it go. Letting go is also a skill. You don't just toss things out willy-nilly. You look to see: Where is the craving, where is the ignorance that underlies that stress? As you do this, you have to learn how to discern which desires you want to hold on to for the time being, and which ones you want to let go of—because the path includes desire as part of right effort, and that's something you should develop. The path is something you want to develop until it's served its function, and then you let it go. That requires discernment.

The duty with regard to the cessation of stress and suffering is to realize it, to verify it, to bear witness to it, i.e., to directly experience it. In other words, you experience what it means to let go of craving, to develop dispassion for craving. This, too, is a skill. You have to learn how to watch yourself let go of a particular craving and notice that it really does take a

burden off the mind. For the most part, we don't notice these things. When we drop one craving, we're quick to go to another one. In fact, that's usually why we drop the first one: We think we've found something better to crave, something more interesting, something new, something intriguing. You get tired of what you've been holding on to, and so you go grabbing at something new. There's very little time to stop and notice: What is it like to let go of craving? In what way does it decrease suffering?

At the same time, there are things to develop. That's the path, starting with right view and going on through right concentration. And although there is a stage at the very end of the practice where you let go of the path as well, you've got to develop it in the meantime.

The purpose of looking at things in this way is to have a framework for how you're going to understand your life, and how you can use that understanding to free yourself from suffering. The Buddha wants you to drop the framework where you're looking at yourself, yourself, yourself all the time: what's me, what's mine, what I've got that I don't like, what I've got that I do like. He asks you to put those concepts aside and use these other concepts as a way of framing things, because the two frameworks have different imperatives. If there's a "me" that you have to shore up and look after, then it carries the imperative of figuring out how to feed this me, how to choose food for it, how to make sure you have a good store of food, and how to make sure that that store of food is going to last. These are all imperatives of getting, getting, and getting. When the world goes well, everything is smooth, the teeth on that "getting" aren't too sharp or too vicious. But when things get really difficult, when resources get scarce, you've got to watch out because the imperative to feed—physically and emotionally—is not always a friendly one.

If that's the framework for our attention and the imperatives that we're acting on, things can get pretty nasty. So the Buddha says to look at things simply as stress, its cause, its ending, and the path of practice leading to its ending. Learn to depersonalize everything. That carries a different set of imperatives, a friendlier set of imperatives. Instead of trying to push away your sufferings, you try to understand them. When you can't understand them, you develop the path to make the mind really quiet, still, alert, until it's in a position to see the difference between the stress and the cause of stress, so you can apply the appropriate duty.

It's like going into a room where there's a lot of smoke. You don't put out the smoke. You try to put out the fire that's causing the smoke. If you go around putting out the smoke, the fire just keeps churning out more and more smoke all the time, and you never come to the end of it.

The same with the mind: One of our problems is that we don't really understand what to do with stress. We try to abandon it, and it just won't be abandoned. The more we try to shake it off, the more firmly it sticks to us, burning us all the time. We have to work our way through the smoke to find the fire: That's what you put out. That's what you let go of: the cause of stress. So focus on learning how to distinguish these things, in the same way you have to distinguish between the kind of craving that causes stress and the kind of craving or desire that develops the skillful factors of the path.

All of this requires skill. In fact, one way of translating ignorance, avijja, is "lack of skill." The knowledge that replaces it, vijja, is skilled knowing, which comes from having developed the skills. Note that there is a doing and a gradual perfection, a gradual mastery, of these different imperatives. When you've got the framework firmly in mind, then when things come up, you can perceive them in terms of that framework, and that way you know what to do with them. As you keep trying to do the right duty, you get better and better at it, until you have it completely mastered.

In many ways, even though it's all too often overlooked, the most essential passage in the sutta, the heart of the sutta, is the wheel. Back in the Buddha's time, that's what they would call the combining of two variables: not a table, but a wheel. You see this in the legal texts, like the Vinaya. There would be many possible factors for an offense, so they'd run through all the various permutations, around the circle to show the verdict in each possible case. In this case, there are four truths and three levels of knowledge, so the sutta just goes around the list, one by one by one, until it's gone through all the twelve permutations.

This is why it's called the Dhamma wheel, and why we have the wheel of Dhamma with twelve spokes on our wall. It's also a convenient symbol to make you think about the circle that goes around the rim of the wheel. It's the framework for how to perceive things, and to know what you've got to do once you understand. When you have an experience, you know where to put it in the framework of the four noble truths, so you know what to do with it.

This is the kind of attention we're trying to develop. The Buddha would often say at the beginning of a Dhamma talk: Pay careful attention. This didn't mean just to listen carefully. It also meant to bring the right framework, the right framework of thought and questioning, to see how you can get the most out of what he has to say. Then you take that framework and apply it to your practice.

For instance, as you're sitting here right now: Where in the breath is stress? What quality of mind can you bring to the breath to alleviate that stress—to help put an end to it, to undercut the cause of stress? Even just thinking in these very basic terms of how you deal with the breath is the beginning of the framework for the four noble truths.

Then as you work with the breath, as you get more and more skilled at it, you can take the skills and turn around and start applying them to the mind, to the different events in the mind. You find that this framework will take you far. That's why the Buddha said that the most important internal quality for awakening is appropriate attention.

See if you can bring this way of looking at things to bear right here, right now, at the breath. Start getting some practice in mastering those skills.

Heedful of Death

February 11, 2011

Greek philosophers used to say that thinking about death is the beginning of wisdom. It's what makes you stop and think about life, and to seriously examine your life. But just thinking about death on its own is not enough to give rise to wisdom. Some people arrive at the attitude of "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die," as if that were the best way to spend your time in the light of death. Wisdom requires more than just thinking about death. It also requires thinking about your potential as a human being, your potential for happiness, where that potential truly lies, and what you can do to get the most out of it. As the Buddha pointed out, it is possible, through your actions, to find a true happiness. Your actions have a huge power to determine the type of happiness and the type of pain that you meet with in life. Your choices do make a big difference.

Reflecting on this fact is what gives rise to heedfulness, and heedfulness is actually what gives rise to wisdom. You realize you have to be careful in what you do, say, and think, because if you're careless, you can create a lot of trouble, both for yourself and for the people around you. In fact, heedfulness is the root of all skillful qualities. It's because we're heedful about the potential dangers and the potential opportunities that are opened by our actions that we develop good qualities of mind. We realize that this is a good use of our time: that even though we may not know what the future holds in store, we do know that if we've developed our powers of mind—powers of mindfulness, alertness, ardency—these skills, these powers, when developed, will help us in any situation.

That's one of the reasons why we're here: to work on developing these powers. As you keep the breath in mind, you're developing mindfulness. As you focus on what's actually happening with the breath, and on whether the mind is staying with the breath, that's the quality of alertness.

Ardency, however, is what actually develops these things. In other words, as soon as you've noticed that you've slipped off the breath, if you're ardent you'll come right back. If you're not ardent, you'll notice, but you'll

just wander around and look at the flowers, look at the butterflies, and after a while say, "Well, maybe I should get back to the breath." It's good that you get back, but the whole point is to get back more and more quickly. Because it's in those gaps in your alertness that important things are going on in the mind.

The mind does have a tendency to place a curtain over its workings, like the wizard in The Wizard of Oz, who likes to hide behind the curtain as he manipulates his machinery. Once the curtain is stripped away, it destroys the illusion. But the mind likes to engage in illusions. It builds thought-worlds that don't seem totally real unless you can close off your awareness of how the thought-world was built. It's in those gaps of alertness that the actual machinations of fabrication are going on, so those are precisely the things you want to see. As soon as you realize you've slipped off the breath, come right back. You learn several things. You'll learn how the mind slips off and what it's doing in the middle of the time when it's slipping off. You learn important lessons about the workings of the mind.

Ardency also means that while you're with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breath is going in the different parts of the body. As you breathe in, where do you feel the energy flow? Can you sense any tension or tightness or blockage in the flow? If you do, what can you do about it? Sometimes just being alert to it is enough to disband any tension. Other times, you have to work things through more carefully.

Try to develop the ardency that's willing to stick with it and be patient. If one approach doesn't work, you try another. If you can't go directly through the blockage, well, try to circumvent it. Or if there's a pain in one part of the body, and focusing on the pain or trying to bring the breath to the pain doesn't seem to help, bring your focus to the breath to the opposite side of the body. Or you may notice that some parts of the body are doing all the work in your breathing, and they're doing it for the sake of other parts of the body, while they themselves feel starved. So give them a chance to breathe just for themselves. Say, let your shoulders do the breathing, but the breathing only has to go into the shoulders for the time being. See what that does.

In other words, you use your ingenuity. This is an important part of ardency: that you don't give up when one approach doesn't work. You try new ones. In this way, you develop mindfulness, your alertness, and your

concentration. You develop your discernment so that you can bring all these qualities not only to issues of the breath, but also to other issues in life as well.

This is one of the advantages of getting the mind still like this, balanced in the present moment. It's in a more impartial space. You can drop your regular narratives for a while and just work on the processes of the mind, so that you can begin to notice when you start picking up other issues in life—such as the issues that normally come when someone in the family dies, or someone you know well dies. You can look at the issues, and you can also look at the mind as it's dealing with those issues, but you can look at it from a position, at least a little bit, of detachment. That way you can observe more clearly, and more all-around, what's going on—and why it's suffering. When the mind is still and clear and balanced like this, it can ask itself questions, pose questions, and get a more balanced answer.

Now, there's no 100% guarantee that every answer appearing in a quiet mind is going to be reliable. But it's more likely to be reliable than if the mind is just running around. When the mind is really still, it can face the questions that we usually don't like to ask, make observations that we don't usually like to make, but are important.

There's a passage where the Buddha recommends that when somebody dies, you reflect on the fact that your body, too, has a similar fate. It hasn't gone beyond that fate. You can do this either to gain a sense of detachment from your body, or a sense of perspective on time: You don't know how much time you have left. In other words, it's good for heedfulness. You can ask yourself: When you yourself are going to have to face death, what skills are you going to bring with you? Because it is possible to die without suffering, but it requires strong mindfulness, strong alertness, and a good understanding, where you're able to separate the mind from its objects, separate it from its feelings, perceptions, thought constructs.

There's a famous passage where Anathapindika, who has long been a supporter of the Buddha, is on his deathbed, and Ven. Sariputta and Ven. Ananda go to see him. Sariputta tells him, "Try to detach your consciousness from sights, from sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. Detach it from the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind." He goes through a long, long list, even to the extent of: "Detach your consciousness from the consciousness of these things." In other words, anything that comes up as

the object of your awareness, you try and let it go, let it go, let it go. Anathapindika, even though he had been supporting the Buddha for many years, had never had the opportunity to listen to a Dhamma talk like this. He started to cry. Ananda thought he was losing his grip, but Anathapindika said, "No, I'm not losing my grip. It's just that after all these years, only now am I getting to hear a Dhamma talk like this." He asked Sariputta to tell the Buddha, please give this Dhamma talk more often to laypeople.

The point being that the most important skill you can develop is the skill that's able to let go. Whatever appears in the mind that's causing any kind of weight or concern, you're able to let it go. This may sound irresponsible, but it's an important skill that you need to develop, even as you negotiate the issues of every day life. If you carry all your responsibilities around with you all the time, the mind is going to wear out. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, its goodness begins to break down if it tries to carry too much.

When you have responsibilities, you have to learn how to put them down, even if it's only temporarily. For the time during which you put them down, you want to be able to leave them alone and not anticipate that you're going to pick them up again. Just stay with the sense that while you're here, they're put down. This gives the mind a chance to rest and can stand up straight.

You can compare this with the coolies who work on the ships in Bangkok and carry huge bags of rice, bags of other things, on their backs as they go up and down the plank, off the ship and onto the shore, and off the shore back onto the ship. Because they spend so much time walking around with burdens on their backs, they tend to walk bent over, even when the burdens are not there. You don't want your mind to be like that. You want it to be able to stand up straight—every now and then, at least—so that it can remember what it's like to stand up straight, and how good it feels.

So it's an important skill while you're here with the breath, that you want to be able to let go of everything else.

Then when you work with the breath to the point where the breath stops, you can let go even of the breath. Just be with the awareness in and of itself that remains. It may be an awareness of space, or an awareness of consciousness in and of itself. If you have to hold on to something, well, hold on to that for the time being. But it's possible to let go of even those things. This is the skill that will see you through.

The reason that people suffer as they get sick, and suffer as they die, is that the mind will latch on to something that, in many cases, is pretty random. It has to do with their past kamma, things that suddenly pop up at that moment. And because the mind is weak and feels threatened, it'll just latch on because it's not used to not latching on to anything. When your awareness can't stay with the body, it's going to grab at anything at all if it hasn't been trained. But if you learn how to let go, you realize you don't need to hold on to anything. It's not like you're going to fall down anywhere.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has you practice at the skill of reminding yourself that when it's just awareness in and of itself, there is no up, there is no down, there's no inside, there's no outside, there's just awareness. Up, down, inside, outside: Those all have to do with the body, with physical reality. But when the mind is able to let go of those things, it doesn't need to have those coordinates. It's like going into outer space. The concepts of north, south, east, and west have no meaning in outer space. They have meaning only in reference to the Earth. In the same way, when you let go of things, you don't have to be afraid that you're going to fall anywhere, you're right here. If your good qualities of mind have been developed enough, that'll be sufficient.

So meditation is a progressive process of letting go, letting go, of peeling things away, peeling things away. But to do this requires the heedfulness that motivates the practice, and then the good qualities you develop as a result of the heedfulness: wisdom, purity, compassion, mindfulness, alertness. These are things with a real solid worth that you can hold on to in the meantime.

When you think about how little time you have left, and how little time we all have left, heedfulness is what reminds you that these are the things you want to develop, these are the things you want to give most of your time and energy to, because they give the greatest rewards.

Don't Worry, Be Focused

December 27, 2011

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

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

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

The mind goes out for two sorts of reasons. One, is because of misunderstanding and two, something's wrong with your energy. Now, if it's a case of misunderstanding, the mind tells itself you would really rather think about this or you've got to think about that, whatever. You have to learn to reason with those voices, to tell them: No, this is not the time for

that. No matter how compelling the worries may be, you have to learn how to say, "No, No, No. We can't go there right now."

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

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

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

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

touch with that sense of heaviness, solidity, to anchor you. Focus as much as possible on that.

There are other times when the distractions are more due to a low level of energy. A lot of the distractions come because you're just too weak to keep things in mind. You've been working hard all day. The mind feels weak. The body feels weak, and thoughts are just wandering all over the place with no specific purpose. It's not that you feel a real need to think about these other things, it's just that your energy is so low that whatever comes popping up through the nervous system pops right into the mind and you don't have any defense against it. So you've got to find where your strength is.

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

Ajaan Lee also talks about being sensitive to outside energies. Different places have different kinds of energy. Different species of trees have different energies. In some of the places where you meditate, the energy is healthy and helpful; in other places, it's not so helpful. You have to learn how to tune in to the levels of energy that are actually going to help you. If the energies from outside are not so helpful, you have to fill the body with your own energy to help keep them out.

But there will come times when you're really sick and there doesn't seem to be anything in the body that gives you any source of energy. That's where you've got to depend on the mind.

The Buddha enumerated five kinds of mental strength: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. You've got to find your energy here, and the energy starts with your understanding, understanding that your actions matter. That's what conviction is all about, and that can make a difference. There are some areas, though, where your

actions can't make a difference. That's where you have to drop any worries you might have.

The Buddha lists three things that people might be worried about as they're approaching death. They might be worried about their children, their family; or they might be worried about their parents; or they might be concerned about the pleasures they're going to have to leave. Here we are in the human realm with all its human pleasures. You start thinking about the fact that you won't sense these pleasures anymore: You won't see any beautiful sunsets, you won't see any rock canyons, you won't taste any delicious food—all the other pleasures you can think of. You have to put them aside, and one of the ways you can deal with that is to realize that there are better pleasures, on other levels of being, up in the heavens.

There's a sutta where the Buddha advises a person who's counseling someone who's dying to say, "Well, there are better pleasures than that." When you get the person focused on one level of heaven, you say, "Well, there are better pleasures than that." When the person is focused on the brahma worlds, you tell the person that even those brahma pleasures are inconstant. They're not going to last. Brahmas still have self-identity, which means they still suffer, even if it's only a subtle level. If the mind is really ready, it can actually let go at that point.

As for the things you might be worried about, you have to remind yourself that there comes a point where you have to put everything down. You can't carry the world around, or as they say in Thailand, you can't hold up the sky forever. When you see that those things are beyond you, you have to realize, okay, you did what you could, that's as far as you can get with that particular issue, that particular responsibility. Maybe someone else will pick it up, but even if they don't pick it up, you can't worry about that anymore. Your worries aren't going to help the situation. You've developed the perfections that come from working at that task and what's left is the dregs.

As Ajaan Lee said, it's like squeezing juice out of a piece of fruit. You've got the juice, and what's left of the fruit after you've taken the juice is just dregs. The juice is the good quality of the mind that you've developed. Don't forget that. Hold on to that. And to whatever extent you're able to be mindful, to be alert, you just keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. Don't give up. Have the conviction that fires your persistence, that enables you to stay

mindful and alert. The continuity of mindfulness and alertness is what develops concentration. At the very least, you want to stay really focused. When you can start making distinctions—the pain that's coming in, the sense of weakness, the sense of being overwhelmed, whatever—just view that "whatever" as an object of the mind, whereas your awareness is something else.

This is where discernment comes in and starts seeing the distinctions. There's the awareness of the feeling, but then the feeling itself is something else. Stay with the awareness. This is a constant theme throughout the Wilderness Tradition. When Ajaan Maha Boowa gave those talks to the woman with cancer, that was one of the themes he repeated over and over again: Learn how to see the distinction between your awareness and the pain. In the talk we had from Ajaan Chah last night, that, again, was the message: The pain is one thing; the awareness is something else. Learn how to see that they really are distinct. They're already distinct, it's simply that we, in our ignorance, glom them together.

Now, this kind of discernment requires that you be really, really still, to see these distinctions. If the mind is running around, the distinctions are going to be blurred, but when you're really still you see that things actually do separate out that way, and the reason you didn't see that was because you were running past all the time.

That's the energy of the mind. It's a focusing in, with the determination that you don't want to come back and suffer anymore. As for anything that pulls you away from that determination, that distracts you from that determination, you've got to learn how to drop it, drop it, drop it. All the stories, all the narratives that you tell yourself about who you are, what your responsibilities are, and what's going to happen in the world, what's going to happen to your family, your friends, all the projects that you take on: You need a spot in the mind where those things just don't matter, where the quality of your mind, the quality of your awareness does matter. So, you've got to stay focused. You've got to learn how to develop this quality of staying focused, of not letting yourself get distracted by whatever stories, or narratives, or sense of responsibility you may have, or fear that you're going to miss out on something. The really important things are right in here.

As we meditate, we're basically learning two things: the right way of understanding all this, and the right way of bringing your energy to bear, to

develop this focus. When they talk about making the mind one, it's both a matter of the singleness of your focus and also of making the mind your first priority. This is the number one thing you need to work on, the number one thing of real value. I've always found it strange that people say that there's no essence to the Buddha's teachings—that the Buddha taught there is no such thing as essence. This comes from a modern academic prejudice against what they call essentialism. They like to see the Buddha as an early critic of essentialism, claiming that the Buddha denied the existence of any essence in you or in his teachings or in anything at all. But the Buddha never taught that. He said that there is one thing of essence, and that's release: the mind when it's totally free. That has true value, essential value.

So, when you're making your mind one, it's both to bring it all together and to make that sense of release its one object, its one priority. That's what this practice is all about.

Strengthening Discernment

January 11, 2012

The standard definition of discernment is the comprehension of fabrications, or sankharas, and you try to comprehend fabrications in terms of the four noble truths: seeing, on the one hand, how some fabrications cause suffering and actually constitute suffering—suffering itself is a fabrication—and on the other, how you can turn some of these fabrications into the path.

After all, the path is something you put together. Some people think the path is just being equanimous, learning how to watch things arise and pass, pass, pass away, and not get involved. But equanimity, it turns out, is also a kind of fabrication, and you need more than just equanimity in order to really understand fabrications.

One of the best ways to develop discernment around fabrications is to actually put the factors of the path together. It's like getting a chemistry set. You learn about the chemicals by mixing them in different ways. The best way to do that with your meditation is to mix the fabrications of your mind and your body in a way that gives rise to a sense of real stillness, so you can see things very, very clearly and, in the course of getting there, you really come to understand how the mind acts. This is how it deals with the breath, how it deals with feelings and perceptions, to create a state of becoming. Then, from that state of becoming, when you're really solid and very clear, you can see the subtle fabrications going on that you would otherwise have missed.

So, we're focusing on the breath. This is called bodily fabrication. How do you use this bodily fabrication to create a state of right concentration? As you watch the breath, you begin to notice that there are feelings, and the way you breathe is going to be guided by your perception, your mental image, of what it actually means to breathe. There's a whole tribe of people out there who, every time they say they focus on the breath, point to their nose. But that's not the only place where you feel the breath. In fact, if that's your perception of what the breath is, it's important to realize that you can

create a lot of tightness, a sense of constriction, lots of uncomfortable feelings in the body, as you try to focus everything on that one spot.

Stop to think: When the Buddha is talking about right concentration, he says you want to have a sense of ease, fullness, refreshment going throughout the whole body, suffusing and permeating the body. It can come in waves over the body. Or it's totally still and solid throughout the body. There is a sense of peace that fills the body. The important thing is that the ease and pleasure pervade your sense of the whole body.

What kind of breath could lead you there? And what perception of breathing could lead you there? This is where it's useful to think of the breathing as a whole-body process. The breath is not the air. It's the energy that allows the air to come in—and that's only one aspect of the breath energy. There are other energies that flow throughout the body as well. You can think of these energies coming in waves through body as you breathe in and breathe out. That can get you to one level of concentration. It allows the mind to settle down with a sense of spaciousness, so you're not clamping down on one spot in the body.

Then if you think further, there's Ajaan Lee's distinction between what he calls the visiting breath and the resident breath. The resident breath is the sense of energy that's there all the time, like the cosmic background radiation from the Big Bang. It's always there in the background. If you hold that perception of the breath in mind—with all the blood vessels and all the nerves as being breath channels, and they connect throughout the body, out to every pore—then if one part of the body seems to be starved of breath energy, where can it get that energy from? If it has to pull it in from outside, it's disturbing. How about allowing it to flow in from other parts of the body? Think of everything connecting up, connecting up, connecting up. Go through the whole body with that perception of allowing things to connect, and that your body is open on all sides like a sponge. Then notice how that feels.

That act of noticing is called evaluation. It's a verbal fabrication.

What you're doing is that you direct your thoughts to the breath, which is another kind of verbal fabrication. Then you hold in mind certain perceptions of the breath, and try to develop a perception that allows the mind to settle down with a sense of ease and refreshment filling the body. The feelings of ease and refreshment count as mental fabrication. The

perceptions that you hold in mind of the breath, count as mental fabrication as well.

This means that you've got all the three of the major kinds of fabrication right here: bodily, verbal, and mental. You're putting them together to create a sense of ease and well-being. This state of becoming in the present moment is called right concentration.

It's through mixing the chemicals that you learn about chemistry, through dealing with fabrication that you learn about the processes of fabrications in your experience of body and mind. You begin to see subtle levels of fabrication in the mind that you may not have noticed otherwise: assumptions that you carried around, for instance, about the breath. Sometimes you'll catch yourself, as you do this, thinking of the breath shrinking as it goes out, forgetting that the resident breath doesn't have to shrink. If your sense of energy shrinks with every out-breath, and your awareness shrinks with every out-breath, you won't be able to create that full body, still, constant, awareness that the Buddha is asking you to develop.

On the one hand, you want to keep in the back of your mind his descriptions of right concentration, and on the other hand, watch what you're doing. Use the descriptions as a way of evaluating. Are you getting there or not? If not, what's wrong with your perception? What's wrong with the way you breathe? What's wrong about the way that you're thinking about things and evaluating them? Could you do this more skillfully?

This requires that you use your ingenuity, an aspect of discernment that all too often gets overlooked, but it's something that you have to strengthen all the way along the path. Not only in concentration, but also when you're developing your virtue. Working with the precepts, you'll find yourself running up against situations in which you know that if you stick very narrow-mindedly to the precept, you may be causing trouble. So how do you stick with it, avoid breaking it, and yet avoid the trouble? You've got to use your ingenuity. Like in the cases where you don't want to tell the whole truth because you know someone will get damaged: How do you change the subject? How do you answer a question without really answering it? You have to use your ingenuity.

Or if there are ants or other pests in the house: How do you get rid of them without killing them? The dumb way is to go around killing them

every chance you get. That doesn't require much intelligence. The ingenious way is to figure out: How do we get the pests out and not kill them at all?

This issue came up once in a discussion group when we were talking about how to deal with ants invading the house. Someone complained, "Gee, a really profound subject here tonight, dealing with ants in the house." I said: "Look, if you can't figure out an intelligent way to rid your house of ants without killing them, how are you going to figure out subtler things?" This is a good test of your ingenuity right here. It's a good test of how you fabricate a situation, how you perceive it, how you think about it. This applies to all aspects of life. The way you talk with other people, the way you have dealings with other people, the way you deal with hardships in life: All of these are a test of your ingenuity, a test of your ability to fabricate a state of mind that doesn't suffer in the face of difficulties, hardships, the rough and tumble of every day—a state of mind that also doesn't cause anyone any harm. That's an aspect of discernment as well.

We strengthen discernment by looking at every opportunity we have in life to understand how we're fabricating a particular situation through our perception of it, and how we can change our perception about the opportunities, the alternatives, that are available to us.

This comes back down to the standard description of how discernment develops and how it's made strong: through developing virtue and concentration. It's not that discernment is the end product that comes once the virtue and concentration are developed. It's in the process of developing the concentration, it's in the process of working with the challenges of the precepts, that your discernment grows stronger day by day.

Equanimity Isn't Everything

June 22, 2012

There was a time when Rahula went to the Buddha—he was probably a teenager at the time—and asked the Buddha how to do breath meditation. The Buddha didn't start out immediately with instructions on breath meditation. He taught Rahula a whole set of other practices to go first. The most striking one is the practice of making your mind like earth, making your mind like water, like wind, like fire. How is it like earth? If you throw disgusting things on the earth, the earth doesn't shrink away.

The same principle applies to the other elements. You use water to wash away disgusting things and it doesn't get disgusted. The wind blows disgusting things around but isn't disgusted. Fire burns disgusting things and doesn't get disgusted, it just keeps on doing its duty. In the same way, the Buddha said, when you meet up with pleasing and displeasing things, you should make your mind non-reactive: a lesson in how to accept things the way they are.

But he doesn't stop there. When you look at the instructions on breath meditation, they're very proactive. The equanimity is there to serve a purpose: so that you can watch things carefully, watch things consistently. If you say, "Gee, I don't like this, I don't like that," and get worked up about what you like or don't like, you're never going to learn anything. You have to be willing to sit with good things, sit with bad things, so that you can see them and understand them. Only when you understand them can you really free yourself from them.

This is the attitude we have to adopt at the beginning: that we're going to put up with everything that happens in the course of our meditation. Not just to sit there like a bump on a log, we're going to watch so that we can understand where things come from and where they lead. When feelings arise, whether they're pleasant or painful, you want to understand where they come from. You also want to understand the impact they have on the mind.

But then, the Buddha doesn't just have you sit there with the feelings or with whatever else comes up. In the course of the breath meditation, he tells you to try to breathe in a way that gives rise to feelings of rapture, breathe in a way that gives rise to feelings of pleasure. The instructions on feelings in the Maha Satipatthana Sutta tell you to be aware of feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure or pain, and then divide each of those three into two types. There's pleasure of the flesh and pleasure not of the flesh. There's pain of the flesh and pain not of the flesh. Feelings of neither pleasure nor pain of the flesh and not of the flesh. Those not-of-the-flesh feelings don't just happen on their own. You have to will them into being; you have to be skillful in giving rise to them. Otherwise, they don't happen. Pleasure not of the flesh is the pleasure that comes from jhana. That doesn't just happen. You have to direct your thoughts; you have to evaluate things. There's work that has to be done to get the mind into jhana. It's a fabrication.

Pain not of the flesh is also something you have to give rise to. When things aren't going well in life, you remind yourself what you really do want to attain the goal of total freedom from suffering. The problem is, of course, you're not there yet. I don't know how many times I've heard people say, "Well, don't desire the goal and you'll be okay." But the Buddha never recommended that. He said, this painful feeling not of the flesh is a feeling you want to give rise to, a pain you want to give rise to, because it gives you the motivation to dig deeper inside, to find a better foundation for your happiness than just sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and tactile sensations. It's a healthy kind of pain: the pain that leads to gain.

Finally, there's the feeling of neither pleasure nor pain that's not of the flesh. That's the equanimity that comes from the practice of jhana. That, too, is something you want to develop. Because, as the Buddha said, there are basically two ways you can undercut the causes of suffering and stress. One is through equanimity, and the other is through what he calls the exertion of fabrication.

Now, equanimity comes in many levels. There's the ordinary equanimity that you learn how to just accept whatever comes up, like the Buddha taught Rahula in the beginning: Just learn to be non-reactive.

But that kind of equanimity, the Buddha said, doesn't go very far. You try to replace it with the equanimity that comes from jhāna: in other words, equanimity not of the flesh. So even there, there's an exercise of fabrication

in creating equanimity. It requires a certain amount of effort. Then you use that equanimity to look at things. There are certain things, when you look at them in the mind, where you say, "Gee, I don't really want to go there. I've seen that particular defilement, I've seen where it goes, I've seen what it does, I've had enough." And that's it. It just disappears. Or as Ajaan Lee said, it gets embarrassed. If you look at it steadily enough and forcibly enough, you can see right through it.

However, there are other causes of stress and suffering that you can't see right through that way. They have a real pull on the mind, a real hold on the mind. This is where you have to exert a fabrication, like we're doing it right now: focusing on the breath, adjusting the breath. There's verbal fabrication in the directed thought and evaluation as you direct your thoughts to the breath and evaluate the breath. Bodily fabrication is the in-and-out breathing itself, because that's the process that fabricates your sense of the body. It's one of the few bodily processes that you can actually control. You can decide to breathe long, you can decide to breathe short, heavy, or light. It's not like your digestion. You can't tell your stomach to turn on or turn off. The breath is a process, however, that you can shape, and it really does have an impact on how you experience the body. So you learn how to exercise that control. Otherwise, emotions come in, they take over, not only the mind, but also the body. The fact that they get lodged in the body through the breath gives them a lot of power. You've got to learn how to undercut that power by breathing through them in a different way.

That covers verbal fabrication and bodily fabrication.

The third kind of fabrication is mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. The feelings you create through the breath can help to undercut the hold of certain hungers in the mind. The perceptions you keep in mind—the images and words with which you label things—can give you a new perspective on what's happening.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha included so many similes and images in his teachings: to give you a new range of similes and images—a new range of perceptions—to apply when you need to. For example, he has a whole list of similes on sensuality. It's like a set of bones with no meat. A bead of honey on the blade of a knife. So the next time you see the honey of a sensual pleasure, think of it: This is on the blade of a knife. You're going to cut your tongue if you try to lick it off. It's borrowed goods. You go around

with all your cool things, and all the cool people you can gather around you, but the goods aren't really yours. Especially the people with whom you find sensual pleasure: They can change their mind at any time; you don't own them. You can't really control them. If your happiness is dependent on something you can't really control, it's really in a bad situation.

You've got to learn how to keep these perceptions in mind to help wean yourself away from the defilements of lust, anger, or greed.

To bring the mind into concentration requires perceptions as well. You need to have a certain perception of the breath, a certain perception of the body to get into concentration and stay there. At the very least, you need to have an image in your mind or a coded sensation that says, "Okay, this is your focal point. This is where you're going to stay in order to remind yourself to stay here." That, too, is a mental fabrication.

There are lots of different ways you can use these fabrications to counteract those causes of stress and suffering that are really deeply entrenched. You have to learn through your own experience which causes of suffering respond to which type of approach. We may like the idea that "We'll just watch this, and it'll go away on its own eventually, and that will be the end of it." We may notice that there are times when that actually happens, but it's not going to happen all the time. You need to have other approaches. Even equanimity itself isn't something that comes easily on its own. You have to cultivate it; you have to give it a more solid foundation.

Then there's the problem of getting attached to the equanimity itself. We hear about awakened people who are extremely equanimous, but it's not the case that the equanimity is the essence of their attainment. After all, the Buddha didn't say nibbana is the ultimate equanimity. He said it's the ultimate happiness. The fact that awakened people have a basis for their happiness that doesn't depend on conditions: That's what allows them to look at conditioned reality with a lot more equanimity. They're not trying to feed on it anymore; they don't need it for their happiness. So the equanimity is a byproduct.

There is a common problem when people meditate, and they hear about awakened people being like this or that, so they try to clone what they've heard. But all you can clone are the effects. If they're cloned, they're like Dolly, the sheep: They die quickly. You want to find the real foundation for that equanimity, which is something else entirely.

The Buddha said this comes from something he calls non-fashioning. Regardless of what comes up, you learn how not to identify yourself with it. You don't make it part of your self-definition. Then, again, we hear, "Okay, I'll just decide that there's no self, and that's that." Well, the thing is that there are going to be subtle feelings of self, subtle feelings of identification that creep in when you're not aware. Rather than trying to deny them, you admit the fact that they're there. You try to notice where there's identification.

Now, there's a certain amount of identification that's needed to get the path together. You have to have a healthy sense of self in order to do this. It means a self that's not always looking for shortcuts, for an easy way out. One of the problems with identifying equanimity or radical acceptance as the whole of the teaching is that it teaches you to be lazy. It's an excuse for laziness. Even determinism can be an excuse for laziness.

Once, when I was new to the practice and I was trying to think about kamma, I said to Ajaan Fuang: "You know, if everything in the present is conditioned by kamma in the past, that means there's no choice that I have to make right now about whether I'm going to practice or not; it's just going to happen. It may seem like a choice, but it's not really a choice." He looked at me, and the look he gave me made me realize I should never think that way ever again. Then I realized: That was laziness speaking.

Equanimity is part of the path because it puts you in a position where you can see things more clearly, more consistently. You're a better judge of what works and what doesn't work in terms of your strategies on the path and the way you fabricate things. It's not an end in and of itself.

So learn how to use it properly. Use your attitudes around equanimity properly so that you can also handle the kind of fabrication that's needed for putting the path together inside. The good side of this is that the Buddha gives you tools so that you're not just stuck having to sit there with whatever comes up, or to accept whatever comes up and be totally defenseless. There are ways you can handle difficult situations; there are ways you can handle difficult people. Whatever's really getting to you, it's not just, "Hey, just learn how to accept it and that's it." The Buddha doesn't stop there. He said that there's a way to figure out how to deal with each problem. It's going to require some patience and equanimity to see what that way is, but don't be afraid to use the tools he gives you.

Otherwise, you're defenseless in the face of not only difficult situations, you're also defenseless in the face of your defilements, because they can take on the voice of Dhamma themselves. They say, "Well, don't be desiring, don't have craving." Defilements can say that, too. "Don't desire to be rid of us, just learn to accept us." It sounds like Dhamma but it's all a bunch of lies.

Realize that the Buddha gave you a wide range of tools to use on the path. Try to take advantage of them all.

The Essence of the Dhamma

July 28, 2012

We look at the forest tradition and to us it seems very Thai. We forget that when Ajaan Mun was alive he was often accused of not following Thai customs, or Lao customs. He followed the Vinaya very closely, and that required that he not follow a lot of the customs that had developed around village Buddhism in Thailand and Laos. Every time he was accused of not following those customs, he replied that the customs of Thailand, Laos, or any country are the customs of the people with defilements. He was more interested in following the customs of the noble ones.

As he said, if you want to become a noble one yourself, you have to follow their ways of doing things and not be concerned about the customs of the country you come from or your background. You have to be willing to remake yourself in line with the Dhamma, rather than trying to shape the Dhamma to fit your own ideas.

The phrase "customs of the noble ones" appears twice in the texts, once in the Canon, once in the commentary. In the commentary it comes in the story of the Buddha's life after he gained awakening and began teaching. He was invited back to his home city, and the day he came back, he went out for alms. The Buddha's father upbraided him for this, that in their family lineage they had never done anything like that. He was a member of a noble warrior caste, and it was considered disgraceful for a noble warrior to go for alms. The Buddha replied, "I no longer belong to the lineage of noble warriors; I no longer follow their customs. I belong to the lineage of the noble ones. Theirs are the customs I follow."

That's a harsh thing to say to your father, but it was necessary. The Buddha had to break with many Indian customs, just as Ajaan Mun had to break with many Thai customs. Of course, as we bring that principle into our own practice, it means that we're going to have to break with American customs, or European customs, or Australian, New Zealand, whatever customs. We have to hold to whatever's required by the path.

This is where the Canon's teachings on the customs on the noble ones come in. There are four. The first three have to do with contentment. You're content with whatever clothing you have—which, for a monk, means content with your robes. You're content with whatever food you get. You're content with your shelter. You don't get worked up about trying to improve these things—because you look at what you've got and you realize it's good enough for the practice. Part of that chant in today's ordination ceremony dealt with the basic supports for a monk: alms food, rag robes, the foot of a tree for your shelter. It's not much. What we have here is a lot more comfortable than that, which means that what we've got here is good enough for the practice.

This frees us to focus on that fourth custom of the noble ones. You would think—with the first three covering contentment with food, clothing, and shelter—the fourth one would cover contentment with medicine, but it doesn't. It covers taking delight in developing and taking delight in abandoning: in other words, taking delight in developing skillful qualities of the mind and delight in abandoning unskillful ones. This is one area where you don't just rest content with what you've got. You're always trying to improve things in the mind. The Buddha himself said that part of the secret of his gaining awakening was that he didn't rest content with skillful qualities. He kept trying to find out and to master what was more skillful.

This means that you turn your attention away from trying to make your hut as nice as possible, or your robes as nice as possible, or worrying about the food, or the diet. Those are not the issues. The issues are the skillful and unskillful qualities in your mind.

Now in addition to being content about the right things, the Buddha also says you don't exalt yourself or disparage others over the fact that you are content and they're not content with the surroundings. That's a danger that you've got to watch out for. The fact that you live a simple life is not the goal in and of itself. It's a means. Look at it as your medicine. You've got your illness; you take your medicine. Other people may be ill and whether they're taking their medicine or not is no grounds for you to exalt yourself over them.

You don't even exalt yourself over the fact that you're more likely to find delight in developing skillful qualities or abandoning unskillful qualities than other people are. Again, the delight is medicine for your mind. It's like

being in a hospital. Some people take their medicine, other people don't, and you feel sorry for those who don't, but you don't exalt yourself for the fact that you're taking your medicine. You've got your diseases; they have their diseases. You work on yours. And be very heedful of the fact that one of your diseases is this tendency to exalt yourself over other people. Always keep that in mind.

You look in your mind and you see what needs developing. Right now it's mindfulness. Alertness. You want to be as consistent as possible in keeping your breath in mind, and in being alert to the breath, at the same time being alert to what's going on in the mind. Anything that might pull you away from the breath, you've got to be on top of it. Don't let yourself get hoodwinked by it. If you find that you've left the breath, then come right back. You don't have to tie up the loose ends of your thoughts before you leave them and return to the breath. Leave the thoughts dangling. Leave the loose ends loose. Come right back to the breath.

Learn how to use the breath as a means for staying present in the moment. This means taking an interest in the breath, exploring the possibilities of this breath energy in the body. How can you breathe in a way that helps the mind to settle down? How can you best think about the breath? What mental image do you have of the breath that makes the breath more satisfying? You can try different ways of thinking about the breath. Think of it coming in and out of all your pores. If you have a headache, think of the breath energy going down as you breathe in. If you're feeling heavy or sluggish, think of the breath energy coming up.

Take an interest in the present moment, because this is the most interesting part of your life. We tend to measure our life in terms of our plans for the future and our memories of the past. But the way your mind is shaping your life is happening right now. This is the only place where you can watch it in action and make a difference in the choices it's making. You want to do your best to find something in the present that keeps you interested and keeps you anchored here, so that you can watch the processes of the mind and see what really is skillful and what's not.

Now these standards are always true. Some people think the idea that there's something unchangeable about the Dhamma is ironic. After all, didn't the Buddha teach all about change? Well, yes, he did teach about

change, but he didn't say that change was a good thing or a bad thing. It depends on where the change is going.

Remember, his whole purpose in practicing the Dhamma to begin with was to find something that didn't change. He saw that he himself was subject to aging, illness, and death. He was looking for happiness in other things that were subject to aging, illness, and death, and he realized that that was totally pointless. Is there something that doesn't age? Doesn't grow ill, doesn't die? That would have to be something outside of space and time.

That doesn't mean you have to go to the edge of the universe to find it, he said. You look inside the mind. Is there dimension that you can touch within the mind that's unchanging? That doesn't come under space and time? The Buddha found that there is. That's the most important thing about his life.

I've been reading some academic books on Buddhism, and they all talk about how we shouldn't fall for the essentialist fallacy. In other words, they say that we shouldn't believe that there's an unchanging essence to the Dhamma. You have to ask yourself: What do academics know? They just read books. They can talk about all kinds of things regarding Buddhism, but they can't talk about the Dhamma. Their scholarly methods can't touch the most important issue about the Dhamma, which is: Did the Buddha really find a deathless happiness?

That, after all, is the essence. He said that's the essence of the Dhamma. All dhammas, he said, have release as their essence. So you have the word of the academics saying that nothing has any essence at all, and you have the word of the Buddha saying, "This is the essence of the Dhamma." Whose word are you going to take?

This is what makes the Dhamma valuable: the fact that there is an essential, deathless happiness that can be found through our efforts. This is why we're not concerned about remaking the Dhamma in our own image. We're trying to make ourselves fit in with the Dhamma, to follow the customs of the noble ones that lead to this noble attainment. And it is noble. It harms no one. It requires all the good qualities of the mind. It's what makes human life special, the fact that we can train ourselves to reach this.

A magazine recently had an article about the different realms that the mind can occupy. For the deva realm, they had a picture of someone meditating in a cabana by a beach: Club Med, in two senses of the word. The

human realm was a couple lying on the grass. I would put that second image in the animal realm. What makes the human realm really good is not the sex. It's the fact that you can develop the mind and you can find something of really solid worth. The word essence in Pali, sara, also means heartwood, like the heartwood of a tree, the part that's really valuable, the part that lasts, that you can get the most use out of.

That's something about the Dhamma that never changes—which is why the customs of the noble ones never change. We do ourselves a great favor by trying to raise the level of our minds: to take delight in abandoning the unskillful qualities that would pull us off the path, and to develop the skillful ones that aid in reaching something that really is of true value, true essence. Something worth giving your life to.

Freedom Through Painful Practice

August 6, 2012

One of the measures of your wisdom is the extent to which you have a sense of yourself. When the Buddha was talking about this theme, he wasn't talking about some sort of mystical knowledge of the Self. It was more having a sense of where your strengths and weaknesses are, and how you can build on your strengths to overcome your weaknesses. After all, as you practice, even though you may be listening to a Dhamma talk or living with a teacher, still the teacher can't get into your head and say, "Okay, do this, focus there."

If you're lucky to have a teacher who has the ability to read your mind, that's one thing. But even then, the teacher's not going to be there 24 hours every day. You've got to learn how to gauge what's going on in your own mind and become your own teacher. One of the prime lessons we learn looking at the Buddha becoming his own teacher, was noticing where he was causing himself unnecessary stress, unnecessary suffering. In some cases, it's obvious. In others, it's more subtle.

Sometimes you're holding on to a Dhamma teaching you think is absolutely good Dhamma, but it's not the right teaching for that particular time, that particular place. You end up using even the Dhamma to create suffering. One of Ajaan Lee's recommendations is to turn things inside out. If you're holding on to something, ask yourself: "What if the opposite were true?" Or if you think you're holding on to something that's giving you pleasure, ask yourself: "What if it were destroyed?"

Last night I was talking to a woman who's got an art studio. She was complaining that sometimes in her meditation she spends the whole session thinking about her art: whatever project she has going. I recommended that prior to the meditation, or at the very beginning step of the meditation, she should just imagine torching the whole studio: nothing left of any of her artworks, past, present, or future. She found the idea startling, and that's the whole point. Ask yourself, suppose your art studio were no longer there,

everything had been trashed. It's amazing to realize that a part of the mind would actually be happy.

I had a friend years back who was working on being a novelist. He had written a novel and was very proud of it, but it required constant tinkering. Then a few months later, I learned that he had burned the whole manuscript. He said it was the most liberating event in his life as a writer. Sometimes the things you hold to dearly—and not just things, also ideas you hold to in your mind—you have to experiment with dropping them for a bit to see what the results would be. Which parts of the mind would actually be lighter? Which parts of the mind would actually feel less burdened? Even the things around which you create a very strong sense of your goodness as a person: It's good to imagine them gone.

Then, of course, there's the body. A lot of people say they're not attached to their body, so they don't understand why we have the chant about the 32 parts of the body. It seems to be a lot of negativity, but the chant is to remind you that this body you're depending on is not all that dependable. What would you do if you didn't have it? What would you do if parts of it were paralyzed? Unusable? The immediate thought that comes in, of course, is that you really are attached to the body after all.

The next question is, can you use that thought to help spur you in the practice? After all, there will come a time when you simply won't be able to use the body anymore. It won't move. Your eyesight will go; your hearing will go. All your connections with the world have to come through the senses of the body, so when they go, so goes your connection with the world. Do you have something in the mind that would be willing to, or be able to, find a sense of well-being, even when they all stop functioning?

The thought may sound negative, but you can get a positive use out of it. It gives you a sense of renewed purpose in the practice. Contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body, the certainty of death, and, of course, the uncertainties of death: These can all act as a spur to heedfulness.

There's a story in one of the commentaries about the Buddha talking to a young girl who's very wise. He asks her, "Do you know?" She says, "Yes." "Do you really know?" "Well, no." "But do you know?" She says, "Yes." Then he leaves.

Her parents are upset with her. They say, "Why are you talking back and forth with the Buddha like this?" She replies, "He asked me if I know I'm

going to die, and I said yes. Do you really know when? No. But you do know that you're going to die? Yes." That, she said, was his meaning.

Often we view these meditation objects as negative ones. In fact, the Buddha talks about contemplating the body, contemplating death, as painful practices. But you'd be surprised at how liberating some of these painful contemplations can be. Especially when you realize the extent to which you are holding on to things that really weigh the mind down unnecessarily in areas related to the body, related to your identity of who you are in this lifetime. So even though these practices are painful practices, remember they have a positive side, a positive purpose. As the Buddha said, contemplation of death, when it's done rightly, leads to the deathless.

You might also say that contemplation of the body, when it's done rightly, leads to happiness that doesn't have to depend on a body. It helps cut through a lot of areas where you think, "In order to be happy, I need things just to be this way, that way." We're beginning this meditation right now with a heat wave coming through. But the heat wave is an affair of the body. It doesn't have to impinge on the mind. If you can develop a sense of detachment from the affairs of the body and just leave them at the body, not dragging them into the mind, a great sense of freedom can come as a result.

Look at the positive side of these painful practices, because they are your friends. Ajaan Suwat made the point many, many times that we've got everything backwards. We think suffering is our enemy and craving is our friend. He said if you can learn to look at the pains of life, look at the sufferings of life, and gain discernment, you can free yourself from them. In that way, they're your friends.

As for your cravings, you have to learn how to dissociate yourself from them and be very leery of what they're telling you. Otherwise, they, to use Ajaan Fuang's phrase, lead you around by your nose. The image is of a water buffalo. It's got a ring in its nose, and the owners tie a rope to the ring. Wherever they pull the rope, the water buffalo's got to go, because the ring hurts so much.

It's the same with the affairs of the body, and a lot of the other things that you hold on to as being really precious. They're a ring through your nose. These contemplations are for the purpose of taking the ring out so that you're free to go where you want. You don't have to be pulled around. You don't have to be a slave to craving.

These painful practices can lead to joy. Always keep that side of them in mind.

Talks on the Buddha's Sixteen-step Instructions in Breath Meditation :

The Steps of Breath Meditation

November, 2002

When the Buddha teaches breath meditation, he teaches sixteen steps in all. They're the most detailed meditation instructions in the Canon. And the breath is the topic he recommends most highly, most frequently, because the breath is not only a place where the mind can settle down and gain concentration, but it's also something the mind can analyze. It's where all the insights needed for awakening can arise, while the mind is being mindful of the breath, alert to the breath, and also conscious of how it relates to the breath.

In the later stages of breath meditation, the emphasis is focused less on the breath than on the mind as it relates to the breath. In the beginning stages, though, the emphasis is on the breath itself, on using the breath to snare the mind and bring it into the present moment. In the first two steps you're simply with long breathing and short breathing, sensitizing yourself to what long and short breathing feel like. Beginning with the third step, though, there's an element of volition. You train yourself, and the first thing you train yourself to do is to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, aware of the whole body as you breathe out.

When the Buddha describes concentration states, he doesn't use images of single-pointedness. He uses images of whole-body awareness. When a sense of rapture and pleasure comes from the breath, he tells you to knead that sense of rapture and pleasure through the whole body, the way you would knead water into flour to make dough. Another image is of the rapture welling up from within the body and filling the body just like a spring of cool water coming up from within a lake, filling the entire lake with its coolness. Another image is of lotuses standing in a lake: Some of the lotuses don't go above the water but stay totally immersed in the water,

saturated from their roots to their tips with the stillness and coolness of the water in the lake. Still another image is of a person wrapped in white cloth, totally surrounded by the white cloth from head to foot, so that all of his body is covered by the white cloth.

These are all images of whole-body awareness, of a sense of rapture, pleasure, or bright awareness filling the entire body. That's what you want to work on when you get to know the breath, because the type of awareness that allows insight to arise is not restricted to one point. When you're focused on one point and blot out everything else, that leaves a lot of blind spots in the mind. But when you try to get a more all-around awareness, it helps eliminate the blind spots. In other words, you want to be immersed in the breath, aware of the breath all around you. One of the phrases they use for this—kayagatasati—is mindfulness immersed in the body. The body is saturated with awareness, and the awareness itself gets immersed in the body, is surrounded by the body. So it's not that you're up in one spot—say, in the back of the head—looking at the rest of the body from that one spot, or trying to block awareness of the rest of the body from that one spot of awareness. You've got to have a whole-body awareness, all-around, 360 degrees, so as to eliminate the blind spots in the mind.

Once you have this type of awareness, you work at maintaining it—although the "work" here is not like other work. You work at not moving your attention, at not letting it shrink. You work at not taking on other responsibilities. With time, though, the work becomes more natural, more second-nature. You feel more and more settled and at home. As the mind settles in, its usual nervous energy begins to dissolve. The body actually needs less and less oxygen, because the level of your brain activity begins to grow calm, and so the breath gets more and more refined. It can even grow perfectly still, for all the oxygen you need is coming in through the pores of your skin.

At this point the breath and your awareness seem to have melted into each other. It's hard to draw a line between the two and, for the time being, you don't try. Allow the awareness and the breath to interpenetrate, to become one.

You have to allow this awareness, this sense of oneness, to get really solid. Otherwise, it's easily destroyed because the tendency of the mind is to shrink up. As soon as we think, we shrink up the energy field in certain

parts of the body to block them out of our awareness, which is why there's tension in the body every time a thought occurs. This part of the body gets tense so you can think that thought; that part of the body gets tense so you can think this one, back and forth this way. It's no wonder that the simple process of thinking takes a lot out of the body. According to some Chinese medical treatises, a person whose work is mental tends to use up energy at three times the rate of a person whose work is totally physical. This is because thinking involves tension in the body. Thoughts that go off into the past or into the future have to create whole worlds for themselves to inhabit, and they use physical sensations as part of the process.

When we're getting the mind concentrated, though, we're thinking in a different way. In the beginning stages we're still thinking, but we're thinking solely about the present moment, observing solely the present moment, being alert and mindful to what's going on here, so we don't have to create worlds of past and future. This imposes less stress on the body. In order to maintain that present focus and not go slipping off to your old habits, you've got to keep your awareness as broad as possible. That's what keeps you rooted in the present moment, all the way down to your fingers and toes. When your awareness stays broad, it prevents the kind of shrinking up that allows the mind to slip out after thoughts of past and future. You stay fully inhabiting the present. The need to think gets more and more attenuated.

When fewer and fewer thoughts interfere with the flow of the breath energy, a sense of fullness develops throughout the body. The texts refer to this fullness as rapture, and the sense of ease accompanying it as pleasure. You let this sense of easy fullness suffuse the body, but you still maintain your focus on the breath energy, even if it's totally still. Eventually—and you don't have to rush this—the point will come when the body and mind have had enough of the rapture and ease, and you can allow them to subside. Now, there may be times when the rapture gets too overpowering, in which case you try to refine your awareness of the breath so that it can come in under the radar of the rapture, and you move to a level of total ease. Then even the ease—the sense of imbibing the pleasure—subsides, leaving you with total stillness.

After you've become settled in the stillness, you can start looking for the dividing line between awareness and the breath. Up to this point you've been manipulating the breath, trying to get more and more sensitive to

what feels comfortable in the breathing and what doesn't, so that your manipulation gets more and more subtle, to the point where you can drop the manipulation and just be with the breath. This allows the breath to grow more and more refined until it's absolutely still. When things are really solid, really still, your awareness and the object of your awareness naturally separate out, like chemicals in a suspension that's allowed to stay still. Once the awareness separates out, you can begin directly manipulating the factors of the mind, the feelings and perceptions that shape your awareness. You can watch them as they do this, for now the breath is out of the way.

It's like tuning-in to a radio station: As long as there's static, as long as you aren't precisely tuned-in to the station's frequency, you can't hear the subtleties of the signal. Once you're right at the frequency, though, the static goes away and all the subtleties become clear. When you're tuned-in to the mind, you can see the subtleties of feeling and perception as they move. You can see the results they give, the impact they have on your awareness, and after a while you get the sense that the more refined that impact, the better. You allow them to calm down. When they're calmed down, you're left with awareness itself.

But even this awareness has its ups and downs, and to get you past them the Buddha has you manipulate them, just as you manipulated the breath and the mental factors of feeling and perception. The text talks about gladdening the mind, concentrating the mind, and releasing the mind. In other words, as you get more and more used to the stages of concentration, you begin to gain a sense of which kind of concentration your awareness needs right now. If it seems unstable, what can you do to steady it and get it concentrated? How do you change your perception of the breath or adjust your focus to make the mind more solid? When the meditation starts getting dry, what can you do to gladden the mind? As you're moving from one stage of concentration to the next, exactly what do you let go that releases the mind from the weaker stage of concentration and allows it to settle in a stronger one?

When the Buddha talks about releasing the mind at this point in the practice, he's not talking about ultimate release. He's talking about the kind of release that occurs as you let go, say, of the directed thought and evaluation of the first jhana, releasing yourself from the burden of those factors as you move into the second jhana, and so on through the different

levels of concentration. As you do this, you begin to see how much those levels of concentration are willed. This is important. Insight can come while you're in concentration as you move from one stage to the next, as you notice out of the corner of your mind's eye what you do to move from one way of experiencing the breath to the next, one level of solidity to the next. You come to see how much this is a produced phenomenon.

This finally leads to the stages of breath meditation associated with insight. First there's insight into inconstancy, both in the breath but more importantly in the mind, as you see that even these stable, very refreshing levels of concentration are willed. Underlying all the refreshment, all the stability, is a repeated willing, willing, willing to keep the state of concentration going. There's an element of burdensomeness there in the willing. Insight into inconstancy or impermanence has less to do with how you consume experiences than with how you produce them. You see all the effort that goes into producing a particular type of experience, and the question becomes, "Is it worth it? Isn't this burdensome, having to keep making, making, making these experiences all the time?"

Then the problem becomes, "What are you going to do to let go of this burden?" If you don't fabricate these states of concentration, is your only choice to go back to fabricating other kinds of experiences? Or is it possible not to fabricate any experience at all? All of our normal experiences from moment to moment to moment, whether in concentration or out, have an element of intention, an element of will. Now you've come to the point where that element of will, that element of intention, begins to stand out as an obvious burden.

Particularly when you look around to ask, "Who am I producing this for? Exactly who is consuming this?" You come to see that your sense of who you are, who this consumer is, is difficult to pin down, because it's all made out of the aggregates, and the aggregates themselves are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. This consumer is something produced as well. This gives rise to a quality the texts call nibbida, which can be translated as disenchantment or disillusionment. Sometimes the translation gets stronger: revulsion. In all cases it's a sense that you've had enough of this. You feel trapped by this process. You no longer find any satisfaction here. You want to find a way out.

So you focus on letting go. According to the texts, first there's a focus on dispassion, then a focus on cessation, then finally a focus on total

relinquishment. In other words, in the final stage you let go of every kind of doing, every kind of volition, of the producer, of the consumer, of the observer, even of the perceptions and the thought-fabrications that make up the path. When the path-factors have done their job you can let them go as well.

All of this takes place right at the breath, at the point where the mind and the body meet at the breath. This is why the Buddha never has you totally drop the breath as your theme of meditation. Progress along the path comes simply from staying right here and growing more and more aware of what's going on all around right here. You develop a more all-around awareness, not only all-around in the body, but also all-around in the mind. You see through the blind spots that allowed you to consume experiences obliviously, forgetting the fact that you had to produce them. It's like watching a movie—two hours of lights flashing up on a screen—and then later seeing a documentary about how they made the movie. You realize that months, sometimes years of labor went into it, and the question becomes, "Was it worth it?" A few brief hours of empty enjoyment and then you forget about it—despite all the work, all the suffering that went into making it.

When you look at all your experiences in the same way, seeing all the effort that goes into their production and asking if it's worth it: That's when you really get disillusioned, disenchanted, when you can really let go. You let go not only of perceptions or feelings as they come and go, but also of the act of creating these things. You see that this act of creating is all-pervasive, covers all your experiences. You're always creating, either skillfully or unskillfully. There is constant production every time there's an intention, every time there's a choice in the mind. This is what begins to seem oppressive; this is what finally impels you to let go.

You let go of the producing, you let go of the creation, and the letting-go really opens things up. The mind opens to another dimension entirely: one that's not made up, that's not created, where there's no arising or passing away. That, too, is touched right here, although at that moment there's no sense of breath, no sense of the body, no sense of the mind as a functioning, creating consumer or producer. When the Buddha talks about it, all his words are analogies, and all the analogies are of freedom. That's about all that can be said when you try to describe it, but there's a lot that can be said about how to get there. That's why the Buddha's teachings are so extensive.

He goes into a lot of detail on how to get there, outlining all of the steps. But if you want to know what the goal is like, don't go looking for extensive descriptions. Just follow the steps and you'll know for yourself right here.

Lessons in Happiness

July 16, 2007

Once, during my first year as a monk, Ajaan Fuang made the comment that sometimes you hear people describing the path as one of letting go, just letting go. But remember, he said, that it's not just letting go. It's also developing.

At that time, I had only a partial notion of what he was talking about. But as you live with the teaching, as you live with the path, you realize it can't just be letting go. You've got to develop things. Because if you're just letting go, often it's letting go out of aversion, letting go out of a desire to run away, and not wanting to do any work. That kind of letting go isn't healthy. Before you let go of anything, you have to develop it, work at it, so that when you let go, you let go out of understanding, you let go, not out of aversion, but simply out of a sense of having had enough. You let go out of a sense of fullness.

For instance, we know that we're going to have to let go of the body, let go of attachment to the body, but what's the first thing you focus on when you meditate? You focus on the breath, which is part of the body. You're not letting go of the breath, you're actually working with it. Look at those sixteen steps of breath meditation. They're basically lessons in how to develop happiness out of the breath, a sense of well-being, a sense of ease from four different angles.

Those sixteen steps fall into four tetrads. The first tetrad deals with the body, the second with feelings, the third with the mind, and the fourth with phenomena or mental qualities. In each of the tetrads, instead of just dropping things or running away, you're told to sensitize yourself to what you've got there. As you get more sensitive to it, the next lesson is in how to develop a sense of ease within that sensitivity.

You're not blocking things out. You're actually making yourself more aware of what's going on from that particular angle.

For example, you start out with the breath coming in, going out. You discern when it's coming in long, know when it's going out long, coming in short, going out short. You sensitize yourself to the varieties of the breath, and the longness and shortness of the breath. But that's only one facet of the varieties you'll find. There's also deep breathing, shallow breathing, fast, slow, broad, narrow, heavy breathing, light breathing. You want to be sensitive to the different ways you breathe, more sensitive to what kind of breathing really feels good for the body. You've got to make yourself aware of the whole body. You breathe in sensitive to the whole body, breathe out sensitive to the whole body. In other words, you get to know the breathing process as a totality.

Then you allow the breathing to calm down so that it becomes gentler, there's less intentional fabrication, and the breath can get more and more quiet, more subtle. As you allow the breath to get more subtle, there's a greater sense of fullness in the body.

One way of inducing this fullness is to remember that when you're breathing out, don't squeeze the body. Think of the body staying full, even as the breath goes out and comes in again, to induce even more fullness, and more and more, so that you really begin to notice that there's something special you can do with the way you breathe. You can develop a sense of ease, a sense of well-being that's very full, very refreshing.

That's the pattern: You sensitize yourself to this, and then you learn how to make it pleasurable, learn to do what's needed in order to make it a good place to stay. Only then can you let it go.

The next tetrad is working with feeling. Now that you've got the breath feeling comfortable, you sensitize yourself to that feeling of comfort, but you don't focus directly on the comfort. You stay with the breath as your primary focus. You're training yourself with the breath, but you sensitize yourself to which ways of breathing feel easeful, pleasurable, which ones give rise to a sense of fullness, rapture, refreshment. Then you sensitize yourself not only to the feeling, but also to the other member of what is called mental sankhara, mental fabrication, which is perception: the perceptions you hold in mind that induce pleasure, the perceptions that induce a sense of fullness. Which ways of visualizing the body, labeling the breath, understanding the breath, are helpful? Which ones are not? Which ones are agitating, which ones are calming? Go for the calming ones.

Here again, you follow the earlier pattern. You sensitize yourself to the fabrication of feeling and perception, and then you allow it to become more calm.

That's when you put it aside and start focusing directly on the mind: the sense of awareness, the knowingness that's been watching over the breath. Where are you going to find this knowingness? Right there at your awareness of the breath. You begin to notice that sometimes it gets weak and loses energy, so you find ways of gladdening it, to lift its spirits. Other times it feels shaky, so you find ways of steadying it. If it feels confined by one thing or another, you find ways of liberating it from its confinement. In this way, you become sensitive both to this quality of awareness and to what you can do to put it into good shape.

That's when you let go of that focus and move on to just phenomenon of mental qualities in and of themselves. You see how inconstant they are. This is sensitizing yourself to them in a very deep level, seeing that even the really good mental qualities of concentration, ease, rapture: They, too, are inconstant. They, too, are fabricated. This is when you start looking at them in terms of what are called the three characteristics, or, more accurately, three perceptions. These are the perceptions you apply: You look at them in terms of their inconstancy, in terms of the stress that's there, and in terms of their being not-self—not you, not yours, not really under your control. You can nudge them here and nudge them there, and exercise some measure of control over them, but, ultimately, they follow their own laws, which you have to respect.

When you're face-to-face with that fact, what do you do to find happiness? You develop dispassion for it. Notice that the dispassion comes not out of anger or aversion, but out of the understanding that comes from mastery, from having really developed these things. That's when you allow things to follow their way into cessation, and then you return everything back to where it came from. You relinquish it. In this way, the relinquishing comes not from aversion or from a desire to run away, but from having explored the full limits of what you've focused on mastering.

So in each of these four tetrads there's a similar pattern. You sensitize yourself to the fabrication that's going on, and then you find ways of finding happiness within that sensitivity by fabricating with skill. You expand your awareness rather than curling up and trying to hide. You let go, not out of

aversion, but out of a full understanding, having learned the lessons of happiness, learned the lessons of pleasure that you can develop from the breath.

Even though we know that there are these three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self, as Ajaan Lee points out, first you take what's inconstant—the sense of ease and well-being—and you make it as constant as possible. You take what is stressful and learn how to find pleasure in the midst of it: How far can you push the envelope in that direction? You take what's not-self and you make it yours through your mastery. That's the developing side. Once things are fully developed, then you let them all go.

Keep reminding yourself, especially when the mind has this tendency to run away and be done with everything, that that's not the Buddha's way. The Buddha followed the path of exploring, cultivating, developing, letting go of what is unskillful, anything he could sense was a weight or burden on the mind, and then going to deeper and deeper levels, from body, feelings, into the mind, the sense of awareness, the sense of knowing, and finally, sensitive at the level of mental qualities: things that can be known by simply watching with total equanimity, so that he ultimately relinquished even the equanimity.

That's mature letting go. It comes from developing your sensitivity, learning the lessons of happiness, learning the lessons of pleasure that the breath has to offer.

You look in the texts and you see that breath meditation and the development of the goodwill, the brahmaviharas, are listed as separate techniques, but in practice they really come together. In the process of working with the breath, you're learning lessons in how to make yourself happy, how to develop a sense of pleasure within. Once you have that sense of pleasure, that sense of well-being, then it's a lot easier to spread thoughts of goodwill in an unlimited way. Because if you're feeling put upon, feeling simply the desire to run away, it's hard to wish happiness for anybody, much less happiness for all living beings unconditionally.

Once you develop the sense of pleasure, the lessons in happiness that you can learn from the breath are that, one, you understand what happiness is all about, and, two, you've got it. You're in a position where you want to

share. You also understand what you're doing when you wish happiness for other beings. You wish that they, too, could develop their inner resources.

At the same time, you put the mind in a good position to see where goodwill is appropriate, where compassion is appropriate, where empathetic joy and equanimity are appropriate. In other words, you've learned from the breath that there are times when the breath is not feeling good, and you're not feeling good: What can you do to alleviate that sense of stress and disease? That's compassion. There are times when it is going well, so you've got to learn how to appreciate that, to keep it going. That's empathetic joy. Then there are other times where you can't do much of anything just yet, so you've simply got to be patient and to develop equanimity. When you can develop this kind of sensitivity inside, it's a lot easier to be sensitive to conditions outside as well, as to when which of the different brahmaviharas is appropriate.

So these practices go together. This is why, in the forest tradition, there's no separate brahmavihara meditation. There are the brahmavihara chants we do on a regular basis. You can reflect, as they say Ajaan Mun did, at intervals throughout the day. When he woke up, he reflected on goodwill for all beings; in the afternoon, waking up from his nap, goodwill for all beings; at night, before he went to bed, goodwill for all beings. The rest of the day was spent focused on the body, focused on the breath. It was a seamless practice.

So when you find yourself wanting to run away from the body or away from your feelings, remember that you can't escape from them until you've thoroughly developed them, until you've mastered them and have learned the lessons of happiness they have to offer. That's when you're in a position to find a happiness that's even greater. We move from a sense of fullness to something even more gratifying. We move from fullness to fullness, to the point where you don't need to be full anymore. You go to freedom. But it can't be done by just running away, saying, "Things are bad, they're inconstant, stressful, not-self, I want to be out of here." You have to take these things and turn them into a basis for happiness, so that your liberation comes from not a sense of aversion, but from a sense of enough. That's the only kind of liberation you can really trust.

On the Path of the Breath

February 11, 2008

Once the Buddha was extolling the advantages of breath meditation, the benefits that could be derived from keeping the breath in mind, and one of the monks said, "I already do breath meditation." So the Buddha asked him, "What kind of breath meditation do you do?" The monk replied, "I sit breathing, putting away any desires for the past or future, and any irritation in the present moment"—i.e., developing a sense of equanimity for what's arising and passing away right here and now. And that was it: That was his method. The Buddha responded, "Well, that is a form of breath meditation. I don't say that it's not, but that's not how you get the most benefit out of the breath."

He proceeded to teach breath meditation in a much fuller way. And it's important to look carefully at how the Buddha taught breath meditation, because you begin to realize how proactive his method was. You also realize that many of the steps contained in his method are more like questions. He said, "Do this," but without fully explaining how you might go about doing it, which means that you have to test and explore.

The first two steps are exercises for gaining practice in discerning the breath—discerning when it's long, discerning when it's short—to help sensitize you to how the breath feels. When you do that, you begin to notice which kind of breathing feels best. He simply mentions long or short, but there are other qualities you can look for as well: deep or shallow, heavy or light, fast or slow.

In other words, you want to get in touch with the physical sensations of the breath. When you breathe in, where do you feel the sensation of breathing? When you breathe out, where do you feel it? The Buddha doesn't say that you have to focus on any particular point. He simply says, "Bring mindfulness to the fore." In other words, be very clear about what you're keeping in mind, which is the meaning of mindfulness. To have a purpose in mind, what you're planning to do, and then your ability to remember that:

That's mindfulness. As for actually watching what's going on, that's called alertness. You need both qualities, but it helps to know which is which.

Because the Buddha doesn't say where in the body you have to focus, you can ask yourself, when you breathe in, where you actually feel it. Put aside your preconceived notions of where you should be feeling it: Where do you actually feel the breath? Where is it comfortable; where is it uncomfortable? From those steps in learning how to sensitize yourself to the breathing, the Buddha then moves on to a whole series of trainings in which you have to learn how to do something. You will something to happen.

This is where the breath meditation gets more proactive. The first training—which is the third step—is to learn how to breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body. In other words, you try to create an expansive state of mind. You're conscious of the breath but you're also trying to be aware of the body as a whole, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes. The question is: How do you do that? Some people find it very easy to go straight to the whole body. Other people have to work gradually up to it. One way of doing that is to go through the body section by section, noticing how the different parts of the body feel as you breathe in, how they feel as you breathe out. To help yourself along, you might try making the breath more comfortable wherever you focus. For example, as you focus on the back of the neck, notice: Is there tension there? When you breathe in do you build up tension there? When you breathe out are you holding on to tension? What can you do to relax it?

This is actually moving into the fourth step, which is to calm what's called "bodily fabrication": the effect of breath on the sensation of the body. But you can combine the two steps. As you go through the body, working up to this full body awareness, you can also learn how to calm the breath so that the sensation of breathing feels good. You begin to realize that breathing is not just a process that you feel in one or two points in the body. The entire body is involved in the breathing process, or it can be involved in the breathing process. The more it becomes a whole-body process, the more refreshing it feels.

This moves on to steps five and six: training yourself to breathe in and out with a sense of refreshment, with a sense of ease and pleasure. You build up to these steps as you try to find which rhythm of breathing is best for each part of the body until you're ready to settle down at one spot. Think of

your awareness spreading from that spot to fill the whole body. Then you go back again and follow the strict order of the steps, which is, once you're aware of the whole body, to allow the sensations of the breathing to calm down.

You begin to notice that your ideas about the breath will have an effect on how calm it can get. You can perceive the breath in different ways. For instance, you can hold in mind the perception that it's a whole-body process. Think of the breath coming in and out every pore of the skin. There is an oxygen exchange happening at the skin. The more wide-open your pores, the more oxygen gets exchanged. If you think of the skin as being wide open, the muscles of the rib cage can do less work. Just make the mind still and hold that perception in place: The breath can come in and go out from any direction through all the parts of your body, all the pores of your skin. It all connects on its own, without your having to massage it through the body.

You'll notice that there are subtle sensations in the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out, that correspond to the grosser sensations of the movement of the rib cage, the movement of the diaphragm. Allow those subtle sensations to blend together in a way that feels harmonious. Think of every part of the body being connected, all the energy channels in the body being connected, so that the breath energy spreads through them instantly and automatically, independently of the in-and-out breath, without your having to do anything to breathe it in or out.

Here you're using one of the aggregates, the aggregate of perception, to help calm the breath down. You'll notice that it also induces a sense of piti, which is usually translated as "rapture," although in some cases it's not quite as strong as what we would ordinarily call "rapture." It's more a sense of refreshment. The body feels full, satisfied. It's as if every little cell in the body is getting to breathe to its heart's content, and is not getting squeezed by the other cells in the process. A sense of ease will come along with this. Once the body has been really refreshed in this way, things will begin to calm down even further.

This is where you get sensitive to what the Buddha calls mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. You've already noticed that changing the perception of how you breathe will have an effect on the breathing process and the feelings that arise from the breathing process. It also has an

effect on the mind. It calms things down. So you can continue exploring exactly which perceptions help to calm the mind down even further.

What you're doing here is learning both calm and insight at the same time. The Buddha never treats these two qualities of mind as diametrically opposed. He points out that they can develop separately, but ideally they should be working together. As you calm things down mindfully, you at the same time gain insight into the workings of the mind. Here you begin to see, on the one hand, the impact the breathing can have on the mind. The more soothing the breath becomes, the more the mind is willing to settle down in the present and feel soothed by it. On the other hand, you see the impact of the mind on the breath. The way you perceive the breath is going to change the way the body actually breathes. Your mental picture of the breath, of the breathing process, will have an impact on which parts of the body actually get involved in that process.

As things grow more and more calm, they lead to a point where you can sit here just looking at awareness—the awareness of the mind itself as it's watching the breath. This is an important ability in the meditation: learning how to observe the mind. It's almost as if there are two minds: the mind being observed and the mind doing the observing. You can watch the state of the mind as it stays with the breath. Then you begin to notice that sometimes it's steady and sometimes it's not. Sometimes it can maintain its concentration; sometimes it can't. Sometimes it feels refreshed and gladdened by doing the meditation; other times it feels like the meditation is more of a chore, when you're just going through the motions. You want to learn how to read your mind in this way. Once you can read it, you can then learn to provide it with whatever it needs.

For instance, how do you gladden the mind when it's feeling a little bit down, a little bit bored by the process? What can you do to make it more interesting? The analogy the Buddha gives is of an intelligent cook working in the palace for a prince. Now to get to be a cook working for a prince, you have to be sensitive to what the prince likes. The prince isn't going to come down to the kitchen and say, "Hey, buddy, tomorrow I'd like fried chicken," or "Tomorrow I'd like tofu." The prince will sit there at his table and he'll reach for this food and not reach for that food, take a lot of this and take only a little bit of that. So you've got to notice that. You have to pick up on the signs the prince is sending. Whether he's sending them consciously or not, you

want to notice them. When you can read his signs, you can anticipate his wants every day.

King Asoka once said in one of his edicts that if the people who worked for him were going to please him, they had to know what he wanted even before he knew. You have to learn how to be that quick at reading your own mind. What does the mind need right now? What is it going to need with the next breath? Sometimes it gets bored with the breath, so you can give it other things to think about. You can develop qualities of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity. You can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. All of these are valid topics of meditation. They're there to inspire the mind, to gladden the heart. You can think about the good times you've been generous in the past, when you didn't really have to share something but you felt moved to share. Or of the times you could have gotten away with harming somebody or taking something away from them, but you didn't. Think about those times. They help bring joy to the practice. In other words, like the cook, you learn how to read your mind and then provide it with whatever food it needs.

The same with the issue of steadying the mind: When the mind is feeling kind of wobbly, how do you get it fully and firmly fixed here in the present moment? You might want to go back and review some of the steps in the meditation: Which ones are you forgetting? Have you forgotten to stay with the whole body? Have you forgotten how to give rise to a sense of rapture, refreshment? Well, go back and do those things. Or you might be able to change the way you perceive the breathing. Think of the breath going down into your bones. Focus on the breathing sensations in your hands and feet. Some people find that focusing on one spot at a time is not enough to keep them really transfixed, so give yourself two spots.

I knew an old woman in Thailand when I was first getting involved in meditation. She was a retired schoolteacher and she said that one of the quickest ways of getting the mind to settle down and stay really focused in the present moment was to focus on the sensations in the head and the sensations at the base of the spine at the same time. Think of those as two breathing centers. You may find that the effort involved in keeping two things going at once—thinking of a line connecting the two to make it a single sensation—really steadies the mind, focuses it, gets it to settle down and stay still.

The next step the Buddha recommends is learning how to release the mind. Here he's not talking about the ultimate release, but simply about how you refine your concentration. One of the important ways of gaining insight while you're in the process of developing concentration is to be able to notice the differences among the various levels of concentration as you go through them.

Sometimes you settle down and you're still hovering around the breath as you try to adjust it. Other times you can let yourself simply dive into the breath, to be bathed by the breathing, without having to analyze much at all. What you've done is that you've moved from using directed thought and evaluation to help with the concentration to the point where you don't need them anymore. You can let them go. There's a much greater sense of refreshment that comes, a greater sense of fullness, as you're one with the breath as opposed to hovering protectively outside. That's one way of releasing the mind. Then you can compare which state is more easeful, which state has more stress. You can provide the mind with what it needs.

Once you've learned these ways of dealing with the breath, the workings of your mind become a lot more transparent, just as the breath element in the body becomes more transparent. That's when you're ready to take the work of insight even deeper, seeing the inconstancy of anything that's intended, whether it's physical or mental—anything that's fabricated in any way at all, whether it's a bodily fabrication or a mental fabrication. No matter how easeful and refreshing and stable the mind in concentration may be, there's still a slight instability, a slight wavering you can detect. As the mind develops a sense of dispassion for everything intentional, it grows disenchanted. It's had enough of this. That's when it's really ready to let go—i.e., it loses interest in fabricating these fabrications, and so they stop. That's when everything gets relinquished, including the path.

This is how you can get great benefit, great rewards out of the practice of breath meditation. It's not simply a means for calming the mind down. The breath itself becomes a way of understanding the process of fabrication in both body and mind. Ultimately, it allows you to develop a sense of dispassion, not because you come into the meditation with a negative attitude, but because you've learned how to outgrow the exercises that the Buddha has set out for you. It's like a child outgrowing a game. You've played the game enough so that you know everything the game has to offer. You've

mastered all the challenges and are ready for something more. So the dispassion here is more like the dispassion that happens when you naturally grow up, when you mature. It's the dispassion that comes when you realize there must be something better.

You sometimes hear that the point of meditation is to learn simply to accept things as they are and not to be too demanding of what you need to be happy. That principle works on an outside level, teaching contentment with your external situation, but it doesn't work on the inside level. The Buddha said that he gained awakening by not resting content with the state of his mind. On the inner level, he said to notice what things can provide what level of happiness, and to see how far you can push this process of fabrication. Because that's what you're doing as you breathe in this way: You're exploring the potentials for bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and mental fabrication to see how far they can go. Once you've explored their limits, you want something better. You realize that you can't look to fabrication, to these acts of intention, for true happiness any further. You've got to go deeper. You've got to learn how to abandon even these skillful intentions.

What this means is that you maintain a high standard for what it means to be happy. In fact, you heighten your standards for what's going to count as true happiness as you grow in the practice. You begin to realize that in the past you've been looking in the wrong place. You've been settling for a crude and unreliable happiness. You've been looking for all your happiness in things that are fabricated. Is it possible for there to be happiness in something totally unfabricated, totally unintended? You look for that—something that lies even beyond the intentions of equanimity, the intentions of calm or stillness, the intentions of insight. You can't get to that level without having developed these other skills, because these are the skills that refine your powers of awareness. They're not taking you to a place that you could create, which is what you've been doing all along, but they are taking you to a dimension you couldn't have found without having created the creations. The act of creation sensitizes you, and as you get more refined in your skill, it clears away a lot of the static in your experience of the present. It sensitizes you to very, very subtle things.

It's like tuning in a radio. The more sensitive your ear, the more you can tell whether you're tuned into the radio station very precisely or you're off a

little bit. If you're off a little bit, there's going to be static, interference. So you keep tuning in, tuning in, as your ear gets better and better. You don't want even the least little bit of static. That's how you get right on target.

This is how the breath leads you all the way to nibbana. Of course the breath doesn't do that itself. But if you follow the Buddha's steps, learning how to master the steps he recommends for you to experiment and explore, the breath does become a path. It's a path happening right here all the time. So try to take advantage of what's right here and see how far you can go.

The Breath All the Way

October 2, 2010

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

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

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

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

Because of the focus on fabrication, this is an insight practice. Because you're using your understanding of fabrication to bring those fabrications to

calm, it's a tranquility practice. So you're working on insight and tranquility in tandem, which makes this an ideal practice for awakening.

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

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

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

the body, you're less likely to act on greed, aversion, delusion, or any of the other ways of being unskillful with others. That way, other people will suffer less from your defilements.

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

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

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

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

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

breathe in, to breathe out.

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

The next four steps have to do with feelings. First you train yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture. The word rapture here can also mean refreshment. Ask yourself, what kind of breathing would feel refreshing right now? Remember that feelings don't simply come and go on their own. The mind helps to fabricate them—in other words, there's an intentional element in every feeling. The way you focus on the breath can give rise to feelings of refreshment, if you do it right. So, ask yourself, "How can I breathe in a way that would feel refreshing, feel full throughout the body, full as I breathe in, full even as I breathe out?"

Once you've mastered that, the next step is to breathe in a way that feels easeful and pleasant. The difference between refreshment and pleasure is that refreshment is like coming across a glass of water after you've been out in the desert. It's a very intense, energetic pleasure—sometimes so intense or overwhelming that it's actually unpleasant. Pleasure, however, is cooler, gentler, more easeful. Once the breath gives rise to feelings of ease, the Buddha tells you to breathe in and out sensitive to what he calls mental fabrication, to see how the feelings induced by the breath have an effect on your mind, and how your perceptions have an effect on the mind as well.

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

If you find that your breathing is laborious, you can think of the breath energy coming in and out of the forehead, down from the top of the head, in

through your eyes, in through your ears, in from the back of the neck going down your back, in at your throat going down through the chest to the heart. Just hold those images in mind and see what impact they have on the breathing and on your mind.

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

Those are the four steps that deal with feeling.

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

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

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

things. So the best way to prepare for aging, illness, and death is to train the mind. Thinking about death can have a riveting effect on the mind.

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

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

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

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

If you find that the mind is being burdened by things like this, you find ways of unburdening it. The Buddha takes this even deeper, into the subtlest

levels of concentration. Each level has a certain element of stress that's very subtle, but it's there. When the mind gets focused on a level of concentration, sit with it for a while to get to know it really well, until you recognize what's really going on in that state of concentration. This can take a while, because when you first hit a new level of concentration, you often don't really see the whole thing. You see that the mind seems less stressful than before. You don't see any stress in this concentration at all. But you have to get familiar with it until you begin to see that there is still a little bit of inconstancy, a little bit of wavering in the concentration, or there are certain mental activities that are a little bit burdensome—not much, but enough so that you can notice the variations in the stress. When you notice these activities and can see that they're unnecessary, then you can drop them.

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

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

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

downs. So the question is, What's causing that? What is the mind doing that's creating that rise and fall in the level of stress?

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

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

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

It's through this kind of analysis that you gain the insight allowing you actually to let go of things. If you simply see things as empty, as changing in line with conditions, you can drop them temporarily, but they come back

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is what breath meditation can do. It's not just a preliminary exercise. It's a path that can take you all the way. You can augment it with other practices, as I've said. When the mind needs gladdening or steadying, when you find that you're stuck with unskillful mental qualities, you can use other techniques to pry the mind free from them. But the breath is where you always come back. It's your home because it's right here, where the body

and the mind meet. It's the ideal place to watch both what's going on in the body and what's going on in the mind. And it's one of the few bodily functions you can control to give rise to a sense of well-being that allows you to stay steadily right here.

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

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

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

Exploring Fabrication

August 29, 2011

The Buddha once told the monks that they should practice breath meditation, and one of the monks said, "I already do practice breath meditation." So the Buddha asked him, "What kind of breath meditation do you practice?" The monk replied, "I focus on the breath, let go of any hankering after the past, any hankering after the future. I try to be equanimous toward the present as I breathe in and as I breathe out." The Buddha said, "Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, but it's not how you get the most out of breath meditation." Then he described the sixteen steps, four tetrads of four steps each. What's interesting about the steps is how much they focus on the process of fabrication.

In the first tetrad, the Buddha talks about training yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. Then the next step is to calm bodily fabrication, i.e., the effect that the breath has on the body.

In the second tetrad, he talks about training yourself to breathe in and out in a way that gives rise to rapture, gives rise to pleasure. Then you breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrication, noticing the effect of feeling and perception on the mind: the feelings of rapture and pleasure you've been inducing, and also the perceptions by which you can stay focused on the breath. What affect do those have on the mind? Then you try to calm that affect. In other words, you move from rapture to ease, and then finally to equanimity. With the perceptions, you try to find ways of perceiving the breath energy in the body that make things easier for the mind, lighter for the mind.

In fact, that's a lot of what it means to go through the various levels of concentration: Your perceptions of the breath grow more refined. For instance, you think of the breath as an energy filling the whole body. If it can maintain its fullness—everything is so connected in the body that you don't need to breathe in or breathe out—then you move to even more refined perceptions: perception of space, consciousness, infinite consciousness

without any end. You're sitting here and you have no sense of where this consciousness ends. That's the ultimate, as the Buddha said, in the oneness of the mind. Everything seems one. You're one with your object, and your consciousness is one with everything. Then you drop the oneness and go to nothingness, from nothingness to the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception. In every case, the feelings and perceptions get more refined; they have less and less of an impact on the mind. That's called calming mental fabrication.

Then in the third tetrad the Buddha talks first about simply being aware of the mind, and then noticing when the mind needs to be gladdened, satisfied, or refreshed; when it needs to be steadied; when it needs to be released. Each of those approaches to bringing the mind into balance requires a certain amount of fabrication. After all, feeling and perception have an effect on the mind, and the breath has an indirect effect on the mind through the feelings.

How do you use these fabrications to gladden the mind? How do you use them to steady the mind? How do you use them to release the mind? In some cases, the Buddha says, you simply watch a particular defilement or a particular hindrance that's weighing the mind down, and simply by your watching it, it goes away. Other times, as he says, you have to exert a fabrication to let go of a particular cause of stress. That can involve bodily fabrication, which is the breath; verbal fabrications, which are directed thought and evaluation; and mental fabrications, which are feeling and perception.

Now, all of this is to get you really sensitive to the process of fabrication. It's not just a matter of things coming and going, arising and passing away. The mind has an intentional element in all of its experiences. Basically, you take the potential for, say, a form or a feeling or a perception, fabrications, or consciousness—these potentials come from your past kamma—and then you fabricate them into an actual experience of the aggregates. There's an intentional element in all of these things.

As the Buddha said, the essence of insight is learning how to investigate the process of fabrication so that you see it with insight. So when you're dealing with the breath in line with these steps, you're developing tranquility and calm, but at the same time you're gaining insight into this process of fabrication—because you play with it. The only way you can

understand cause and effect is by adjusting the causes, changing the causes, and see what kind of impact the adjusting has on the effects. That's when you actually see what is a cause and what is an effect. If you change a cause, and what you thought was an effect is still there in the same way as before, well, maybe that wasn't the cause.

So you're here to understand the impact that the breath has on the body. You try to understand the impact that feelings and perceptions have on the mind. You consciously try to sensitize yourself to them by trying to change that impact as you breathe in, as you breathe out. This way, you're working on tranquility and insight together, by steadying the mind, by calming these fabrications. This doesn't mean suppressing them. It means allowing them to get more refined, so that ultimately you'll see the extent to which the mind shapes its experience, and the extent to which it's causing stress that it doesn't have to cause. That's what the calming is all about. You can get the mind into really good states this way.

This is how you create the path. Remember, the path is something that's fabricated. It's not just a matter of letting go, letting go, letting go. You have to develop, develop, develop too. That's the task with regard to the path. Because the path is fabricated, it too gives you some hands-on experience with this process of fabrication, learning how to do it well. And, in this context, all kinds of things that you might have rejected as not belonging to the path are actually admitted back in—but, on the condition that they be skillful.

Venerable Ananda talks about using craving and conceit on the path. It has to be a skillful craving; it has to be a skillful conceit, but these processes, which eventually we're going to have to let go of, we first have to learn how to handle skillfully. The Buddha talks about papañca the kind thinking where you think of yourself as an object. Ultimately, you will have to let it go, but there are some uses for papañca on the path. It develops a good sense of samvega. You think about all the suffering you've had in the past and caused in the past, and all the suffering you're going to cause in the future if you don't get on the path. That's a really good motivator.

So this is how we learn about things. This is how we gain insight into them, by working and playing with them, manipulating them. Manipulating is not all bad. If we didn't manipulate these things, we wouldn't learn anything about them. How do you think scientists learn anything about

anything at all? They play. They fool around. They poke this, they change that, they set fire to this, explode that, so that they can learn exactly what is a cause, what's an effect, and how they're connected.

We're exploring here too. Always try to take this attitude of exploration. Use your powers of observation, use your ingenuity to figure out how things work, both in the body and in the mind. And see how far this process of fabrication can take you, because you're not going to let go of fabrications until you've pushed them as far as they can go.

That's what the last tetrad is all about. You begin to realize that the raw material from which you been building these things has its limitations. It's inconstant. It can provide only a certain amount of ease. Because it's inconstant, that ease is going to wobble. A wobbly ease is not a very comfortable place to be. Think of a chair with uneven legs. If you're sitting in the chair, you can't really relax into the chair because the chair might tip over. You've got to stay tense, at least for a little bit, to maintain your balance.

That's the way it is with all the ease and pleasure that comes from anything fabricated. It requires a certain amount of tension to keep your balance. And there will come the point where you ask yourself: Is it worth it? As long as the path hasn't been fully developed, yes, it is worth it. But as these factors get more and more developed, you begin to realize that this is as far as fabrication can take you. You begin to lose your taste for feeding on these fabrications.

That's where dispassion comes in. You lose your passion for fabricating. And because you lose that passion, the process of fabrication begins to fall apart. After all, fabrication depends on factors coming out of the mind, the mind's hunger for these things, its thirst for these things. When it's no longer hungry or thirsty, it just stops. When it stops, everything else stops. That's where you let go of everything, even the path, even the discernment that got you there.

This is how we come to understand fabrication. This is what insight is all about—not just watching things arising and passing away, but realizing the extent to which the mind causes them to arise and to pass away. You've got to dig down into this deeper level.

That's why we work with the breath, because the breath goes really deep into your awareness, both of the body and of the mind. When you're close to

the breath, you're close to the sources of fabrication. That's where you can see how these things come about. As you manipulate them, you get a sense of their range, how far they can go, and then how far they can't go.

This is why all the great meditators of the past were not people who just got really tired of things, and got really world weary, and just stopped with a sense of depression. That's not how they found awakening. They actively pursued it: How far can you go? What can you do to bring about true happiness? They used their ingenuity. They used their powers of observation. They actively explored it. That's what brought them to the edge of fabrication, and how they got beyond.

So try to approach the meditation as a process of exploration. You're exploring this process of fabrication in body and in mind. And the breath is a good place to start, a good foundation for your experiments. Remember the Buddha's basic approach throughout his practice was: "I'm doing this, I'm getting these results. Is it good enough? Well, no. What can I do that's better?" Then he tried something new, using his powers of observation and ingenuity, and setting really high standards for himself, really high standards for the type of happiness that would leave him satisfied. Because it's only when you aim high that you can actually hit high. You never hit any higher than you aim.

Breath, Tranquility, & Insight

February 3, 2012

When the Buddha talked about tranquility and insight, he wasn't talking about techniques. He was talking about qualities of mind—qualities that we all have to some extent. The problem is that we don't have enough. That's why we have to develop them. As we start out to meditate, some of us have more tranquility to draw on; others have more insight. So we both build on our strengths and try to make up for our weaknesses.

When you look at how the Buddha described breath meditation, you realize he's trying to have you develop both qualities at once. Tranquility is developed by settling in and indulging in the pleasure of stillness. Insight is developed by learning how to look at the process of fabrication. When the Buddha describes how to do breath meditation in a fruitful way, he's trying to get us to do both.

Once, when he mentioned to the monks that they should practice breath meditation, and one of the monks said, "I already do that." The Buddha seemed a little skeptical. He said, "What kind of breath meditation do you do?" The monk said, "I try to let go of any concern with the past, let go of any hankering towards the future, and try to be equanimous to whatever comes up in the present moment, as I breathe in, breathe out." Which sounds like the way breath meditation is ordinarily taught these days.

But the Buddha said, "Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, but it's not the kind that's going to get great results." Then he proceeded to talk about the sixteen steps in his normal way of teaching the breath. The steps are divided into four tetrads of four steps each. In all the tetrads he has you try to settle in, to calm things down, while at the same time you try to understand this process of fabrication. That's how the steps combine tranquility and insight.

To begin with the body, the first tetrad: Be aware of short breathing; be aware of long breathing; get a sense of how it feels in the body. Then be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, be aware of the whole body as you breathe out. Here he's talking about the breath not just as the air

coming in and out of the lungs, but more primarily as the sense of energy flowing throughout the body. Gaining this large frame of reference right from the very beginning is very important. Otherwise, as you focus on the breath and it gets more comfortable, it's very easy—if your frame of reference is small—to blur out, to find yourself suddenly someplace else.

It's almost as if, to stay in the present moment, you have to fully inhabit the body in the present moment. Nail your awareness down so that the awareness of your hands is in your hands, your awareness of your feet is in your feet, your head is in your head. Because if your range of awareness gets small, it can very easily slip down the tube into the past or down the tube into the future. If it's too big to fit into the tube, it won't go. So establish this large frame of awareness.

Then the Buddha says try to calm the process of bodily fabrication, in other words, the way you breathe. Here, he's introducing you to one of the three forms of fabrication. Bodily fabrication is the in-and-out breath. Verbal fabrication is your directed thought and evaluation, as when you bring up a topic in the mind and then evaluate it. This is how we create sentences in the mind, ask questions in the mind. The third type of fabrication is mental fabrication, which is composed of feelings of pleasure, pain or neither pleasure nor pain, and then your perceptions. Those things—feelings and perceptions—have an impact on the mind. Perception is different from directed thought and evaluation in that perceptions are not really sentences. They're more like images or single words—like "breath," or "big," or "short," or "long." Those things remain even as you get past the first jhana.

As you calm bodily fabrications in that first tetrad, you try to notice: What kind of impact is the breathing having on your sense of the body? As you calm that impact, you're going deeper into tranquility.

At the same time, you're trying to get to know fabrication. This is the Buddha's technique for bringing the two together. Understand: What is causing unnecessary stress in the body right now? What can you do to minimize that stress? This is going to start connecting with the other forms of fabrication as well. The way you perceive the breath is going to have an impact on how you breathe, and the way you treat feelings in the body.

All too often, if there's a pain in the body, it becomes a wall to your breath energy. You build up a little cocoon of tension around it, and the breath won't flow properly. So try to perceive the breath in a different way, as

something that can permeate through the wall of tension and not be affected by it.

As you're working on the breath in this way, you find that you're also working on the feelings. That list of sixteen makes it sound like you're working on 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and you have to go in numerical order. But what you really find as you try to focus on the breath is that you're working on many of the processes at the same time, simply that you're going to be focusing on different aspects. When you're with the breath, feelings and mind-states are right there. When you shift your attention to feelings, it's very much connected with the idea that you want to breathe in a way that feels refreshing, feels full, so that you're not squeezing the breath energy out as you breathe out, and you're not dragging things in as you breathe in. You allow the breath energy to have its fullness, to have its space. You do this in a way that gives rise to ease, pleasure. Then you try to notice the impact that that pleasure has on the mind.

This is where feeling plays its role as mental fabrication. The Buddha says in step 7 that you become sensitive to this process of mental fabrication. How do your perceptions of the breath and of the body, of where you place your awareness, have an impact on the state of your mind?

The next step is to try to calm that impact. Make it something you can settle into, to enjoy. At the same time, you're gaining a sense of how you're shaping your experience of the mind through the way that you perceive things, through the feelings you focus on, or the feelings you ignore, or how you relate to the feelings. What happens when the sense of ease is in one part of the body? Can you spread it to the other parts? If it runs up against something that seems to be blocking it, can you let it slip around, like smoke or water going around a barrier?

As you get more attentive to how these feelings and perceptions are having an impact on the mind, you move into the third tetrad. You're aware of the mind and you're aware of what needs to be done. Is your level of energy down? Do you feel tired, lazy? Discouraged in the practice? What can you do to lift your mind up, to give it a sense of gladness, a sense of well-being in the practice? This may involve the way you breathe. Again, it may involve the way you perceive the breath, the feelings that you encourage by the different ways that you breathe.

Or there are cases where you've got to put the breath aside for the time being, and start thinking about perceptions and verbal fabrications that give you more energy in the practice, that make you happy to be here, such as thinking about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha: how lucky we are that we have a teacher like the Buddha, how lucky we are that the Dhamma is still alive. Think about the members of the monastic Sangha you find inspiring. Or you can think about your own generosity or your own virtue, the good you've done in the world, the bad things you could have done but decided not to on principle. This gives you a sense of your own worth, your own dignity as a person. It gives you a sense of competence that you can handle these things. When it gives rise to a sense of well-being, then you can come back to the breath.

That's for when the mind needs more energy. Then there are times when the mind has too much energy and it needs to be settled down, made more steady. If it's flying all over the place, what can you do to steady the mind? One thing you can do is to use that energy to be more precise in how you notice how the breath energy is going through the body. Go through each of your toes, all the joints of your fingers, all the little muscles in your face, all the little muscles in your ribs, the areas that you tend to ignore, all those little tiny muscles down around your tailbone. Get very precise and methodical. In other words, put more energy into your evaluation of what's going on. After all, you've got the energy, so put it to good use.

Or you can think about the other elements in the body that you experience along with the breath. There's the earth element, the sense of solidity, which gives you a sense of being grounded. If your mind refuses to settle down, you might use some of the contemplations or recollections that are a little bit more brazen. Think about death. It can happen at any time. Are you prepared for it? Suppose that the Buddha is right, that death is followed by new birth, because of the birthing habits the mind has all along. It already grabs on to any piece of clinging and craving that can take it someplace,, so how can you expect that it won't do that at the moment of death? Are you prepared that when you're feeling desperate, the moment you know you can't stay with the body any longer, you're not just going to grab at whatever comes? There's a lot to prepare for. Are you ready to go?

It could happen at any time, you know, and without warning. A little blood clot wanders around and gets lodged in your brain, and that's it. It

gets lodged in your heart, it gets lodged in your kidneys, and that's it. Are you ready for that? This kind of blatant recollection helps settle you down, gets you a little bit more sober, realizing that important work needs to be done and it's got to be done as soon as possible. You've got the opportunity right now, so let's do it.

So, you're using verbal fabrication, mental fabrication, and bodily fabrication to bring the mind into a state of balance.

The same with the last step in that tetrad, which is to release the mind. Releasing, here, can mean anything from simply releasing it from unskillful thoughts all the way to releasing it from the factors present in lower levels of concentration to bring it to very subtle states of concentration. The things that are weighing the mind down: What can you do to let go of them? The things that are getting in the way of settling down, the things that provide unnecessary tension, unnecessary stress in the body or in the mind: What can you do to think of them dissolving away so they're not a burden anymore? Again, this can involve the way you breathe, the way you relate to the feelings, the way you picture the whole process to yourself and then evaluate it.

What you're doing here is that you're using fabrication to settle the mind down in freedom and, in the process, you're getting more sensitive to the process of fabrication, seeing how much your experience of the present moment really does depend on your present intentions, how you shape things from the raw material that's coming in from your past kamma. This is how tranquility and insight are developed together.

Ultimately, they lead to that last tetrad, where you step back from all of this and realize that no matter how good the concentration gets, it's still fabricated. Now, for a long time in the practice, that fabricated ease is going to be good enough. But there will come a time when your sensitivities get sharpened and you start developing a sense of dismay or disenchantment around the concentration—that no matter how good it's going to get, it's still just fabricated. It has to be maintained. It's going to end someday. What can you do to go beyond that? You notice how inconstant these things are. Then from inconstancy you go to the sense of stress, to the point where you don't even want to identify with these things anymore, even the best state of well-being that can be attained through concentration.

As you develop dispassion in this way, you begin to realize that the whole reason you were fixing your food was because you wanted to eat it. When you get dispassionate for the food of concentration, you lose your interest, and that allows it to stop. You don't replace it with any other intention. You give everything back. Instead of this constant feeding, feeding, feeding, you let go of all things. Even the path: You let go of that, too.

This is how breath meditation gives great benefits, as the Buddha said. You're developing both tranquility and insight at the same time, in a way that's really liberating.

So we're not just hanging out in some nice peaceful state in the present moment. We're here for strategic purposes, to develop our calm and tranquility on the one hand, but also to develop our insight on the other. We do this by approaching the issue of being at peace in the present moment as a skill. It's one thing to hang out with something that's calming, but it's another to gain insight into how you're actually shaping your experience right now, and how you can shape it more skillfully, and what the limits of that skillful shaping can be, to the point where you thoroughly understand fabrication and can let it go, because you've seen how good it gets, and that it's not good enough.

The peace that comes from that is much different from simply hanging out in the pleasant place in the present. It actually takes you outside of time and space. That's where the actual deathless is found.

So try to keep the Buddha's steps in mind because they really are beneficial, they really do make a difference. They're not just a pleasant place to hang out. They are that, but they're more. How much more, you have to find by putting them into practice.

Admirable Friendship

July 30, 2009

The Buddha once said that the most important external factor in gaining awakening is having admirable friends—or, more precisely, engaging in admirable friendship, which is a little bit different from simply having admirable friends. In the ideal admirable friendship, you're taking on good qualities from the other friend. The admirable friend is supposed to be a good example in terms of conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment. He or she helps clear up your misunderstandings on those topics, but the friendship becomes admirable when you find yourself growing in those qualities yourself. After all, the purpose of an admirable friend is to help you recognize who your admirable friends are inside. One of our main problems is that we suffer from delusion. Thoughts come into the mind and it's hard for us to tell, "Is this a good thought or a bad thought?" Even if part of the mind recognizes that it may be a bad thought, another part says, "Well, no, maybe it's got its good side after all."

After all, there are so many different opinions out there, and our minds have been filled with all the wrong views that come from the media, wrong views we've picked up from other people. Sometimes, even when the other people are giving us right views, we come away with wrong views.

I was talking to someone tonight, someone with whom I've been talking for years. I suddenly discovered he had some pretty bad misunderstandings, which I thought I'd cleared up a long time ago. Which just goes to show how you can hear right view many, many times, and yet it doesn't sink in. So you can't blame society for giving you wrong views. It's what you've picked up. It was your kamma that made you pick up those things. I've noticed in my own family: My two brothers and I came away from our childhood being raised by the same parents but with very different impressions about what they taught. So it's important, as you're engaging in an admirable friendship, that you try to pick up what's really skillful.

Once you learn to recognize it, you try to develop it within yourself. The first quality is conviction. Conviction means being convinced that the Buddha really was awakened. What does that mean in practice? It isn't just a matter of being convinced of a historical fact. It's thinking about the implications of that fact as they apply to you, one of which is that the Buddha was able to find true happiness through his own efforts, through developing qualities in his mind that we have, in a potential form, in our minds as well. In other words, we have the potential for finding true happiness if we develop the right qualities, too. The implication here is that you've got to look at your mind and develop the qualities that he worked on: heedfulness, ardency, resolution.

Heedfulness, he said, is the most important, in that it underlies all the rest. In some places it's defined as diligence, but it's more than simply just doing the practice diligently. It's having a strong sense that your choices make a difference. This is why conviction in the Buddha's awakening comes down to conviction in kamma: that your actions are important, that they do make a difference, and that you have to be very careful because it's so easy to choose to do the wrong thing, to choose to do the unskillful thing. So when you see the danger of unskillful actions, heedfulness gives you a strong desire for the security that can come in acting in a skillful way.

That leads to the next quality, which is ardency, when you really try to act on this principle. Ardency is another name for right effort. You see unskillful qualities coming up in the mind, and you do what you can to undercut them. Sometimes this means simply watching them; sometimes it means that you really have to exert an effort.

In both cases, this requires the third quality, which is resolution. Usually there's a tendency, when a certain unskillful quality comes up, that you want to act on it. Anger arises in the mind and you want to say something or do something to express it. Lust comes up and you want to act on the lust. So the first part of resolution is holding firm, not giving into the sway of that particular defilement. The other part is that if it requires work to undo it, okay, you're willing to do the work all the way to the end.

I don't know how many times we hear that all you have to do is be mindful of your defilements and not be overcome by them, and that's enough right there. Well, it's not enough, because they can sneak up on you when you're not being vigilant, and you suddenly find yourself doing the

things you know you shouldn't be doing. Then you wonder why. It's because the roots are still in the ground. It's like one of those vines in the orchard. It's not enough simply to cut the vine at the ground level. You've got to dig down into the ground to find the root to be done with it. Otherwise, it just keeps coming back, coming back, coming back, and you have to spend all of your time cutting it back, cutting it back. You're never done with it.

You've got to dig down and see: Where is this particular defilement coming from? Often that means going against your inclinations, going against your old habits. But you've got to be resolute. You've got to be strong.

So when we talk about conviction in the Buddha's awakening, these are some of the implications. You've got to develop those same qualities that he said he worked on—heedfulness, ardency, and resolution—in your own mind.

The next quality you want to develop from admirable friendship is virtue. If you see that an action is harmful, you just don't do it. If you keep on doing harmful things, they become a rut in the mind, and you find yourself falling into the rut again and again and again. At the same time, if you're indulging in a particular activity, it's hard to focus in on the cause of that activity. You may tell yourself, "I'll just watch it as I indulge, and that'll be my mindfulness." Well, no. I mean, the fact that something in the mind said Yes to the activity: You've got to figure out why. And the best way to figure that out is to just keep saying No, No, No, and see what arguments the mind comes up with to counter each No, and taking them apart one by one by one. It's in this way that restraint is an excellent source of knowledge.

The other problem, of course, is that if you indulge in certain activities, you tend to give yourself excuses. There are all kinds of good rationalizations for why you do it. You're not going to see those rationalizations until you say No to them. So the restraint of virtue is an important part of learning to know the mind, to figure out where its unskillful qualities are, and why they have control over you. This is why virtue flows from conviction. Some texts actually say that virtue that's pleasing to the noble ones is actually an aspect of conviction.

Another quality in admirable friendship that goes with conviction is generosity. You see the things you have to give up in order to develop skillful qualities in the mind, and you're willing to give them up. The word caga here means more than just generosity, giving things to other people. It also

means giving things up. Relinquishment might be a better translation. If you see that indulging in certain foods has a bad affect on the mind, you stop eating them. If indulging in certain kinds of conversations has a bad affect on the mind, you stop engaging in them. If indulging in certain thoughts has a bad effect on the mind, you stop thinking them. You give them up. You give them back. You say, "These are pleasures I used to hold on to as mind, but I'm going to give them back. I don't need them because they come with strings attached. They come with poison for the mind."

Finally, there's discernment—which, in this context, is defined as discernment of arising and passing away. What this means is that you learn to look into the mind to see exactly how it's creating suffering out of things where it doesn't have to. You can be sitting in a particular situation and suddenly find yourself suffering, and then you find yourself not. The situation didn't change. It was something that happened in your mind. This is the arising and passing away that the Buddha is talking about: the arising and passing away of mental states.

To see this, the mind has to get very, very still. This is why we sit here practicing concentration, to get everything as still as possible, so that we can see the slightest fluctuations in the mind—when there's stress present and when there's not. The practice of concentration not only gets you still so that you can see movements, but also gets you more and more sensitive to more and more subtle movements. When you get better at this, when you know your mind a lot better, you can start rooting out deeper roots of suffering. As you see things arising and passing away, and you see the suffering that comes and the suffering that goes, the next question, of course, is: What's causing that?

This is where you have your magic bullet. The Buddha says to regard everything in terms of the four noble truths. This means that wherever there's suffering, you look for the cause. You don't attack the suffering, you attack the cause and you abandon the cause. You simply try to comprehend the suffering. That can apply to any mental event. You try to bring right view—all the factors of the path, from right view all the way to right concentration—to bear on that particular issue. It could be clinging, it could be craving, it could be feeling, intention, attention, verbal fabrication, mental fabrication, or bodily fabrication like the breath.

When you think about dependent co-arising and all the various ways that suffering and stress can arise in the mind, it's useful to know that whatever the factor that's coming or contributing to that, all you have to do is look at it in terms of the four noble truths. That will bring knowledge to bear where there used to be ignorance. It's through the abandoning of ignorance that the causes of suffering no longer cause suffering. The suffering goes away. In other words, you learn to breathe with knowledge, you learn to think with knowledge, you learn to label things with knowledge, and see what's happening.

It's interesting that there were questions the Buddha refused to answer. In each case, the next question always was, "Well, why are you not answering this? Is it because you don't know?" His answer was always, "No, I know, I see, and that's why I don't answer." He knew and saw where those questions came from and where they would lead if you tried to answer them. He looked at those mental events in terms of the four noble truths and saw that this particular question is bound to bring suffering, no matter how you answer it. That's the kind of knowledge he was looking for. That's the kind of knowledge he recommends.

Whatever comes up in the mind, you try to look at it in those terms so that regardless of how complex dependent co-arising might be, it's just this series of questions and the series of duties that goes along with these questions: Where is the suffering? How do you comprehend it? Where is the cause? How do you abandon it? How do you develop the factors of the path so that you can realize awakening? This is why the Buddha said that it was through having him as an admirable friend that the monks developed the noble eightfold path. They developed the qualities in their minds—conviction, virtue, relinquishment, discernment—that allowed them to bring suffering to an end.

That's what it means to engage in admirable friendship. It's not simply a matter of hanging around good people. It also involves picking up these particular qualities and developing them in your own mind.

So sitting in meditation is actually an expression of admirable friendship. Any aspect of the path is an aspect of admirable friendship. You're not attributing all the good to the admirable friend. You're taking responsibility to detect what's admirable in that friend, what's worth taking as an example, and then actually developing it within yourself. This, of

course, requires that you use your own discernment, because you can't expect the admirable friend to be a good example in everything. You can't throw all the responsibility on the friend. The whole point of admirable friendship is that you learn to take responsibility for yourself. That's the way in which this factor helps to lead to awakening.

To Purify the Heart

May 14, 2011

One of Ajaan Fuang's teachings that most struck home with me was his statement one night that the purpose of the practice is to purify the heart. All the other things, he said—all the psychic powers and other things that can attract people to the practice—are just games. The real purpose is the purity of the heart.

So how do you purify the heart? As the Buddha told his son, you look at your actions as a mirror for your heart, like we're doing right now with the breath. The breath is like a mirror for the mind. The way we breathe, the way we relate to the breath energy in the body, tells us a lot about the state of the mind right now. It's possible to sit down and, within a few minutes, give yourself a headache, a backache, or get things all messed up inside. Or it's possible to find areas of pleasure that you can develop, potentials that you can develop, to give rise to a state of ease and well-being.

A lot of it depends on how observant you are. That was another one of Ajaan Fuang's most frequent teachings, which is that whatever happens in your meditation, you have to be observant, to watch what you're doing, to watch the results. When something comes up in the mind that seems interesting, you have to immediately watch what the mind does in response. Sometimes something very attractive or impressive can come up in your meditation, and immediately you latch on to it and that spoils it. You're not paying attention to the fact of how you're reacting to things, and so you can miss a lot of things that way.

Which is why, when the Buddha taught Rahula, he taught him to look at his actions throughout the day, his speech throughout the day, his thoughts throughout the day. You want to watch yourself not only while you're meditating, but also as you go through the day, to see what you're doing, see what you're saying, to see what you're thinking, and to see the impact these things have, both on you and other on people. Because the quality of purity goes along with two other qualities: wisdom and compassion.

Wisdom is realizing that true happiness is going to have to come from your own efforts, and, for true happiness to be true, it has to be long-term. To be long-term, it can't harm anyone else. This is how wisdom connects with compassion. You want a happiness that doesn't harm you, doesn't harm others. So you have to keep their well-being in mind. And the quality of purity comes when you look at your actions, your words, and your thoughts to see how they fit in with these principles that you've set up as your goal: the principle of a true happiness, a harmless happiness.

You have to be very thorough. This is one of the reasons why the teaching is not just something that's contained in words or can be put in books. The Buddha set up a monastic order so that people could live closely with their teachers to see how these principles are employed in day-to-day life—and for the teacher to have the ability to see what the student is doing, to see when the student is missing the implications. It's easy to get an idea of the general principles and then to go off and be totally ignorant of how those principles apply, especially in your day-to-day dealings with the people around you.

So the Dhamma is not just words. In fact, the words that a Dhamma talk say are not the Dhamma themselves. They point to the Dhamma. Dhammadesana, the pointing to the Dhamma: That's one of the terms for a Dhamma talk. The actual Dhamma is something that arises in your mind. It's a quality of the heart composed of wisdom, compassion, and this effort to be pure in your actions, i.e., to make sure that your actions really do fall in line with your principles.

Now, because the breath is so intimately related to any kind of action you may do, this is a good place to stay, to watch the mind, your actions, your words, everything you're doing. You want to watch them thoroughly. And the breath is a good place to stay to see this. Without the breath, you couldn't move your mouth, you couldn't move your body. It would be possible for the mind to think without the breath, but it'd be a disembodied consciousness. It wouldn't have an impact on the world outside. It's through the breath that you relate to the world around you. First you use it to relate to the other properties of the body and then, through them, you also relate to other people. It's because of the breath energy in the eye that you see other people. You hear other people because of the breath energy in the ear.

So staying with the breath is a good place to watch all of this, and to learn to be very observant. If you see that you're doing something unskillful, try to develop a healthy sense of shame, i.e., realizing that that was something not in line with your principles, a mistake you don't want to repeat.

Again, this is why we have teachers, so that you can go and talk to them about the mistake. But the teachers don't want to do all the work for you. In fact, that was one of Ajaan Fuang's main ways of instruction. If there was something he saw that you were really confused about, he would straighten you out. But there are other times when he would throw it back to you, and you'd have to observe for yourself.

Like the way you're breathing right now, the way you're relating to the breath energy right now: Nobody can get into your head, nobody else can get into your body and straighten things out for you. This is the way it's been with everybody all along. You have to learn how to relate to your own breath and figure out what you're doing that's wrong.

Then use your ingenuity. If something's not working, try something new. This ability to come up with new approaches and then be willing to test them: That's how you develop skill inside with regard to how you relate to your own breath, how you relate to the energies and other potentials in the body right now. This is something each of us has to discover for him or herself.

That's why Ajaan Fuang said that, as a meditator, you have to think like a thief. In other words, you can't expect the teacher to explain everything to you and give you all the solutions. You have to look around yourself and catch the signs, just like a thief planning to rob somebody's house. You can't go up to the front door and knock on it and say, "Hey, when are you going to be away? And, by the way, where do you keep your valuables?" You've got to watch, case the joint, hide out behind the bushes until you notice their patterns. That's when you know you can slip into the house, and you get an idea of what's valuable in the house, and where it's kept—by being observant.

So always keep this point in mind, that ultimately you have to be your own teacher, you have to come up with ideas when you find yourself face to face with a problem and you've tried all the solutions you've read in the books, and they don't seem to work. Well, you go back and think about how

you might tweak them. Because all the basic principles are there. It's simply the question of which principle applies to your situation right now.

There's that story I tell about the cornerstone in the ordination hall in Wat Asokaram. Ajaan Fuang told that to me one time to explain the attitude of proper respect for your teacher. When they first laid the foundation for the ordination hall, they were anticipating that the Buddha image would be on the west side of the hall, facing east, as it is in almost every ordination hall in Thailand, because the Buddha was supposed to be facing east on the night of his awakening. So they placed the cornerstone with all the relics, Buddha images, passages of Dhamma, and other sacred objects, under the spot where they thought the Buddha image would be.

Then, as the building was under construction, Ajaan Lee changed his mind and decided to put the image in the east side, facing west. Apparently, that was his way of forecasting that Buddhism was going to move West. But when the hall was done, they realized that the cornerstone was now under a section of the hall that people were going to be stepping over. As you know, in Thailand there's a great taboo against stepping over objects like that.

Someone pointed this out to Ajaan Lee one day, so Ajaan Lee turned to Ajaan Fuang and said, "Okay, tomorrow get all the monks down there and move it." Now, Ajaan Fuang knew it couldn't be moved. It was firmly planted in the ground. But he also knew that if he said it couldn't be done, Ajaan Lee would say, "Well, in that case, I'll find someone else who does have the conviction to do it."

So the next morning, Ajaan Fuang got all the able-bodied monks and novices under the ordination hall, wrapped ropes around the thing and tried to pull it, used crowbars to try and pry it up, but nothing worked. That evening he went to see Ajaan Lee and said, "How about if we make a new cornerstone box, put it under the Buddha image, open up the old one, and move all the valuable sacred things from the old box into the new one?" Ajaan Lee nodded his head Yes, and that's what was done.

The point wasn't just that Ajaan Fuang just went ahead and tried what Ajaan Lee told him to do, in spite of his doubts. It was that he also tried to think up a solution on his own and to present that. That's the ingenuity aspect of the practice. It's not that you say, "Well, I've got this problem," and you go running to the teacher and demand, "Okay, solve the problem for me." You want to try your own solutions first. In that way, you become your

own teacher, you become your own explorer of the Dhamma. As you do this, you develop sensitivity to what you're doing. You develop sensitivity to the results of what you're doing. And, as the Buddha said, you use your actions in this way as a mirror to watch your mind.

That's how you purify the mind. That's how you purify the heart.

These are good basic principles to keep in mind as you practice, so that you can find the happiness you want, the happiness that won't let you down.

Remembering Ajaan Suwat

April 5, 2011

Tonight marks the ninth anniversary of Ajaan Suwat's passing. And although it's good to think of your teachers and their teachings every day, it's also appropriate on special occasions like this to stop and recollect: What did they teach? How did they teach? Because it's not just the "what," it's the way they acted, the way they imparted their knowledge and gave instructions that was very important. After all, a lot of the teachings are about action and the principle of action, and so people's actions should show that they're informed by right view and all the other right factors of the path. From them, we should be able to learn what it means to act in line with those factors.

One of Ajaan Suwat's favorite teachings was the customs of the noble ones. He said that this was also one of Ajaan Mun's two favorite topics. The other was the related one of practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. They're essentially the same teaching. In other words, you don't practice in line with your own defilements, or in line with the defilements of the people around you. You practice in line with the way the noble ones practiced the Dhamma. You look at what the Dhamma teaches, what it asks of you, and if there's any conflict between what you like and what the Dhamma teaches, well, you put your likes aside for the time being and give the Dhamma a fair try.

For example, the Dhamma says to develop your virtue, so you develop your virtue in all the detail that it requires. When you take the five precepts, you're basically making a promise, you're making a determination, that you're not going to harm anybody or anything in any of those five ways. Then you really stick with them. But, of course, you're going find out that there are times when you feel tempted to snuff out little animals, take a little something that isn't yours, or tell a little white lie and try to justify it to yourself. You've got to say no, no, no all the way down the line. You're not going to give in to those temptations because you're really going to test: When the Buddha says to take a precept and make it a precept without

limitations, without exceptions, what does that do to the mind? What does that require of you? In other words, you don't follow it only when it's convenient. You follow it even when it's very inconvenient.

That's when the precept really does become a training rule. It trains you in new ways. It forces you to make choices, make sacrifices for the purpose of seeing: What does this do to the mind? Does it lead to the end of suffering, as the Buddha promised? The Buddha made virtue—in the factors of right action, right speech, and right livelihood—an essential part of the path. Why is it essential? The only way to know is through practice.

The same with concentration: The Buddha sets out the pattern for right concentration, and it's amazing that, of all the factors of the path, this is the one that's most often cut out. People say, well, we really don't want jhana. Or maybe, we can do with just the first seven factors of the path. Yet this was the factor of the path that the Buddha found first. Remember the story of how he had gone through six years of austerities and found, ultimately, that they didn't work. He had the good sense and the humility to say, "There must be another way." He remembered a time, when he was younger, when he'd entered the first jhana. He asked himself, "Could this be the path?" And the answer came up in his mind, "Yes."

So that was the first factor of the path that the Buddha discovered. There's another point in the Canon where he describes the seven other factors of the path as requisites or helpers for right concentration. That makes right concentration central. So when the Buddha says you seclude the mind from sensual thoughts, sensual plans, you do that. You seclude it from unskillful qualities and you direct your thoughts to evaluate one object. It could be the breath; it could be goodwill; it could be the unattractiveness of the body. What happens when you really do this?—when you really do get the mind centered to the point where there's a sense of ease, pleasure, rapture, fullness, refreshment, and then you work that pleasure and refreshment through the body.

That's what the directed thought and evaluation are for, to bring the mind to a state of ease with the object, to figure out how to adjust the object, how to adjust the mind so that they're at ease with each other. Then, how do you take that ease and work it through the body? The same with rapture. You really do this, really do work on concentration to see what it does.

The same with the discernment: You want to see how stress arises and passes away in the mind. You want to see how its causes arise and pass away in the mind. You want to bring the framework of the four noble truths to your thoughts, your words, your deeds. What's going on in the mind? What's going on in your actions? Take the Buddha seriously. This is a training, and you have to submit yourself to the training if you're going to know whether this kind of discernment works or not.

This is the example that Ajaan Suwat set. He didn't just talk about these things. He was very strict about the precepts, he worked at concentration, he worked at discernment. You could pick this up in his words and his deeds, in addition to his teachings. This is what gave weight to his words and deeds, gave weight to his teachings as well, that they all informed one another.

So it's up to each of us to decide: To what extent are we going to submit to the training, to follow the customs of the noble ones? Which are: to be content with whatever food, clothing, shelter you get, and not to exalt yourself over the fact that you're content with these things. Because you realize that you're doing this not to make yourself better than other people, but simply because you've got these diseases of greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind. You need to cure them.

Then there's the fourth custom of the noble ones, which is to delight in abandoning and to delight in developing. In other words, you abandon unskillful actions, and you take delight in it, you're happy to do it; you're happy to develop skillful qualities. You take pride in your work. Look at this as a skill that you're working on. Take joy in being able to master it. Because the pleasure that comes from working on the skill is much greater than the pleasure that comes from enjoying nice sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations, or enjoying the praise of other people.

That was one of the things we noticed about Ajaan Suwat: He wasn't concerned with the praise of other people, what other people would think or not think about him. He had a very strong sense that he was here to train his mind, and he told us that the attitude we should have here is that we're not here to get other people, i.e., that we're not here to attract other people to the practice. We're here to get ourselves, i.e., to bring ourselves to the practice, to master the steps. If other people are inspired by our example, and want to join us, that's fine. But if not, we just want to make sure that

what we're doing really does fall in accordance with the Dhamma and really does put an end to defilement, really does put an end to suffering.

This is another aspect of the traditions of the noble ones. The story that comes in the commentary is from the first time the Buddha returned home. The day after he arrived he went out for alms. His father was very upset. Here was his son, a member of the noble warrior class, going out begging for food. He reprimanded him: "Nobody in our family has ever done this. This is not one of the traditions of our family, to go out for alms like this." The Buddha told him, "I no longer belong to the traditions of that family. I belong to the traditions of the noble ones. This is one of their traditions: to go for alms."

This is good to think about when you think about practicing the Dhamma here in America. It's not a matter of bringing Thai customs or Asian customs and forcing them on Americans. At the same time, it's not a matter of giving in to the American way of doing things. There's a certain American approach to spiritual life that takes over almost everything that's come to this country. Certain beliefs that are tied with the Transcendentalists, tied to the Romantics, have worked their way into spiritual life in America, and practically every version of religion that comes here gets remade in their image.

Well, that's not what Ajaan Suwat was here for. As he said when he went back to Thailand, there was nothing in America that struck him as lying above and beyond the Dhamma, what the Buddha taught. He had in mind the tradition of Ajaan Mun, who had been often criticized about not doing things the traditional Thai way, the traditional Laotian way. His response was that those traditions, like the traditions of every country, are the traditions of people with defilements. If you follow those traditions, you're not going to gain awakening. To gain awakening, you have to follow the traditions of the noble ones.

It's good that we look for those traditions in our own practice and try to follow them, and not be concerned with the praise or the blame offered by people at large. Again, we're not here for them. As Ajaan Fuang often said, nobody hired us to come here and practice. We're here of our own free will. The praise and blame of other people is irrelevant, unless we see that their comments really are in line with the Dhamma.

It's good to keep these principles in mind, because they help keep us on course. Because as we follow the traditions of the noble ones, there's a good chance—at least it opens up the chance—that we can become noble ones ourselves. And that's a gift. Just as Ajaan Suwat's teachings were a gift, his example was a gift, we want our example of our behavior to be a gift to others as well. This is how we keep his teachings alive, how we keep his example alive.

When I went back to Thailand after his death, right before his funeral, I was asked to give a Dhamma talk. I talked about some of the experiences of living with Ajaan Suwat here in America. That was the point I stressed as the main theme of the talk: the traditions of the noble ones. As he once said, he came here to America, and what did he see? All the amazing things of American progress were still subject to being inconstant, stressful, not-self. There was nothing that lay beyond the Buddha's teachings. And as you looked at the example of his words and his deeds, it bore out the fact that he really did take the traditions of the noble ones seriously. He practiced the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, not in line with his defilements. Wherever there was a conflict between his wants and the Dhamma, he allowed the Dhamma to take precedence. In that way, he was able to get the most out of the practice.

Try to keep his example in mind.

Multi-Dimensional Dhamma

January 25, 2011

We live in a culture that likes to reduce things to soundbites, catchwords, buzzwords, quick and easy ways of boiling things down. As a result, when we come to the Dhamma, there's soundbite Dhamma, catchword and buzzword Dhamma. We're told that Buddhism boils down to one particular practice, like noting, mindfulness, or spreading thoughts of loving kindness. Sometimes we're told that it teaches just a handful of basic principles: letting go, equanimity, emptiness, contentment, compassion. If that's all we know of the Dhamma, we miss the fact that it has many dimensions. It does contain all of these things, but it also contains more. It can't be reduced to just one principle.

When you approach the practice, you have to realize that it has many dimensions: not only how you deal with your own mind, but also how dealing with your own mind affects your relationships to other people and to the things you depend on for life. When you want to gauge the practice and events in your mind, and to gain a sense of which teachings really are useful when applied in a particular way, you have to look at things from several angles. Just as the Buddha was said to have an "all-around eye," you have to look at your practice from all sides.

The Buddha taught his stepmother, Mahapajapati, this multiple perspective, giving her a list of eight tests for what counts and what doesn't count as Dhamma and Vinaya. "Dhamma," here, means teachings, actions, and qualities that arise in the mind. "Vinaya" means the healthy, effective way of disciplining those actions and qualities. You want to make sure that your actions pass all eight tests if your practice is going to stay on the path.

The list falls into three parts. It starts with two principles focusing primarily on the goal: being dispassionate and unfettered. It also includes two principles concerning inner attitudes that help you reach the goal—persistence and contentment—as well as four principles governing the way you interact with other people: being modest, shedding your pride, finding seclusion, and being unburdensome. When you gauge any teaching, action,

or quality that arises in the mind, you have to look at it from all three of these angles if you want to know whether it's true Dhamma or not.

The qualities of the goal—dispassion and being unfettered—are first in the list to show where all the others are focused. This is what the practice is all about: learning dispassion, learning to free the mind from the ways in which it fetters itself. These two qualities are closely connected. The passion that we feel for the objects of the senses, including objects of the mind, is the fetter that keeps us tied. The objects themselves don't tie us down. We're the ones who latch on to them, and our clinging is what keeps us trapped.

This fact is reflected in the image the Buddha uses to talk about passion, the way we cling. The word for clinging—upadana—applies not only to holding on, but also to taking sustenance, the way a fire takes sustenance from its fuel. In feeding on the fuel, the fire has to cling to it; in clinging, it's trapped. Only when the fire lets go is it released.

The same with the mind: When we learn how to let go of our passion for sensual obsessions, and then on a deeper level our passion for experiences of forms or formless phenomena in strong concentration, only then are we truly free.

In following this program, the way you practice is going to have an impact on other people. You've got to take that into consideration, along with your responsibility for the material things you depend on. This is why the Buddha includes other tests in his list as well.

In terms of relationships, the Buddha says that true Dhamma teaches you to be modest, to shed your pride, to find seclusion as much as you can, to be unburdensome. These principles are mutually reinforcing. If you learn to be modest, it helps with seclusion. In other words, you're working on good qualities of the mind to cure yourself. You're not trying to show off. You're not trying to impress people. You're practicing because the mind is like a sick person. It needs medicine to cure its illnesses. Practice is like going to the doctor and taking the medicine he prescribes. You're not doing it to impress anybody. You go because you've got an illness, and you've got to treat it.

These principles tie in with the remaining two, which deal directly with inner attitudes. The first of the two is persistence: putting right effort into practice, the effort of developing skillful qualities that foster the health of the mind and abandoning the unskillful ones that keep it diseased. This effort, in addition to leading to dispassion, also needs to make use of whatever

dispassion you can muster. That's because we all tend to view our unskillful qualities as our friends—we like our greed, aversion, and delusion—and only by developing dispassion for them can we see through that supposed friendship.

The second inner attitude is contentment with the physical conditions surrounding you. Contentment fits in with being unburdensome and finding seclusion. You learn to be content with the food you eat, the clothes and the robes you wear, the shelter you have. You realize that whatever you get is enough for practice. And when you're content, there's less need to be a burden on other people—and less need to be involved with them as well. If you're constantly wanting something, you're going to be looking for someone to provide it. If you learn to be content with what you've got, it's easier to stay in seclusion.

So these eight principles reinforce one another. They also balance out possible imbalances that could occur if you pursued one principle on its own. For instance, being dispassionate and being content could be interpreted as letting things be as they are without trying to change anything. But simply lying around accomplishes nothing. Persistence, though, balances this.

The Buddha made a clear distinction between physical contentment and contentment with the state of your mind. Physical contentment is a good thing; contentment with your practice can lead to complacency. One of the primary factors that led to his awakening, he said, was that he didn't allow himself to be content with the level of skillfulness he had attained until he reached the ultimate. That's why he used the image of the person whose head is on fire to illustrate the proper attitude toward your unskillful qualities. You rouse all your mindfulness and ardency to put the fire out immediately. You can't just watch with dispassion or contentment when your hair is in flames. If there are problems in the mind, you've got to deal with them as quickly as you can.

There's also the relationship between contentment and being unburdensome. The discourse on the traditions of the noble ones lists four qualities, starting with contentment with food, clothing, and shelter. Knowing that there are four requisites, you'd expect that contentment with medicine would be the fourth quality. But it's not. The fourth quality is taking delight in developing, taking delight in abandoning. What happened

to medicine? Looking after your health is a part of being unburdensome. There are many rules in the Canon about which medicines and treatments are allowed to the monks: so many that when Buddhism moved from India to other cultures, it carried Indian medicine along with it. Monks are expected to know how to care for one another when they're ill, to treat one another's diseases. If the body gets diseased, it becomes a burden to other people, especially now that medicine and treatments are so expensive. One of our responsibilities as practitioners is to make sure that we stay healthy, although we have to fight the tendency to get passionate about perfecting the body and being really fit. That's one way you have to look for a balance so that contentment and being unburdensome follow the middle way of moderation.

Another set of balancing qualities are contentment on the one hand, and shedding pride and being modest on the other. Some people like to make a show of how frugal they are. This, the Buddha said, is the danger of developing contentment for the wrong motive. You have to develop modesty and work at shedding any pride around your contentment.

Again, the reason for contentment is not to show off. It's a medicine for the mind's diseases. Look at these qualities from many angles.

There are lots of stories from the forest tradition about teachers making sure that their students look at things from many sides, or in Ajaan Lee's words, "don't look with just one eye." There's the story of Ajaan Maha Boowa taking on the ascetic practice of not accepting any food after his alms round. He was very strict about that with himself. He couldn't help noticing, though, that other monks who had taken the same vow at the beginning of the rains retreat were, one by one, beginning to give in to pressure from laypeople who would come late and say, "Please accept our food." This monk gave in, that monk gave in, but Ajaan Maha Boowa didn't give in—and was very proud of the fact. He was going to stick to his vow no matter what. Two or three times during the rains retreat, though, while he sat waiting for the meal to begin—his bowl in order, his eyes closed—Ajaan Mun would appear out of nowhere with food in his hand to place in the bowl: food that had been brought by late-coming donors. He didn't do it too often—just enough to warn Ajaan Maha Boowa to watch out for pride.

Another story deals with Ajaan Chah going around the monastery after a storm, discovering that one of the huts had half its roof blown off by the

wind. He asked the monk living in the hut, "Why aren't you fixing the roof?" The monk replied, "I'm practicing equanimity, learning how to sleep in the half of the hut that's still sheltered." Ajaan Chah said, "That's the equanimity of a water buffalo. Fix the roof."

So when you're looking at the practice, you have to look at many sides. In Ajaan Chah's case, he was pointing out the need to care for the things that you've been given. People have been generous enough to provide food, clothing, and shelter for you. You've got to look after these things. You have to be responsible. You can't let your contentment make you lazy, or your desire to be unfettered make you irresponsible. Taking good care of things is part of being unburdensome.

As a living human being, there are many dimensions to what you're doing. Your actions have an impact on your own mind, on other people, and on your physical environment. You have responsibilities in all these areas. Learn how to keep them in balance.

One common misunderstanding is that the Buddha instituted rules to please laypeople, so that whatever laypeople want, the monks should oblige. That was not always the case. There are many cases where people wanted the monks to behave in a particular way, and the Buddha said No. When monks went out of their way to be smiley, friendly, and helpful to the laypeople in ways the Buddha felt were inappropriate, he called it "corrupting families." In other words, you corrupt them by giving them all the wrong ideas about the role of monks. So in spite of what the laypeople wanted, the Buddha instituted rules against that sort of thing.

Ajaan Fuang talks about being a young boy living in a village temple back in the days when village monks were expected to be doctors—even though there are rules against monks being doctors for laypeople. Ajaan Fuang lost count of how many times someone in the village would fall sick at night, and the abbot had to go look after that person's illness. Ajaan Fuang was the temple boy who had to tag along to carry the medicines. People got used to that kind of service from the monks, and the monks ended up with no time to practice. The forest traditions are really strict about this. The monks are here primarily to cleanse their minds, to put forth the effort to get rid of passion and to unfetter their minds. We don't want to tie them down with responsibilities that get in the way and prevent that.

This is why the Buddha didn't institute meditation retreat centers. He instituted communities that would live together, look after their surroundings, have relationships to laypeople and, at the very least, be dependent on them for food to provide an environment in which both the laypeople and the monastics could become sensitive to all these different dimensions. This way, what might look good from a one-dimensional point of view gets put into a multidimensional perspective, and from this all-around perspective you can see when there's a defilement lurking somewhere in the shadows, like the pride that can come in being overly modest or content, or the laziness that can hide behind being content or dispassionate.

So, remember that the Buddha didn't teach in soundbites. He taught a full training, an all-around training. We benefit when we keep all these dimensions in mind.

Factors for Stream-entry

July 21, 2007

The practice of the Dhamma is ultimately aimed at awakening. It was the Buddha's own experience of awakening that formed the basis for the Dhamma he taught, and also the aim of the Dhamma he taught that put an end to suffering. The end of suffering comes only with the experience of awakening, total awakening. But there are stages along the way. Stream-entry is the first. People like to focus on, "What is it like to be a stream-enterer?" or "What fetters has the stream-enterer put aside? And exactly what does it mean to put these fetters aside, or to be free from them?"

But the real issue is how to get there. Once you get there, then you know the answers to these questions. So the first-order questions should focus on what you do to get there.

There are four factors for gaining stream-entry. Some of them are so basic and ordinary that we tend to overlook them, but it's good to keep them in mind as we practice. The first is associating with people of integrity—the Pali phrase is literally, "true people." The second is listening to the true Dhamma. The third is appropriate attention. The fourth is practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. These are basic instructions on how to be a good meditator. Even if you're not thinking about the possibility of awakening, you've got to focus on these issues if you want to meditate well: Who are you going to take as your teacher? Who are the people you want to hang around?

We were talking earlier today about the monastic Sangha as the vessel by which the Buddha arranged for his Dhamma to last. You have this arrangement where people can devote their whole lives to the practice, and they're not off hidden in some mountain someplace or behind walls. There are places where laypeople can come and go and associate with them as well. This is important, because if you live totally in a lay life, your perspective on what's important, what's unimportant, gets all skewed. Money is the bottom line; the deadline is a dead line. In other words, there's the word dead right in there. You don't meet the deadline, you're dead.

In a situation like that, it's easy to get like the kids we mentioned this afternoon—the ones who had already run up against the law and were put into the special education program. A psychologist asked them to measure the stressors in their lives on a scale from 1 to 10: "How would you rate, say, the stress of finding that your brother was shot by an opposing gang? Having to choose a dress to go to see a movie? Deciding what to do after school when one group of friends wants you to go and smoke pot with them, and another group of friends wants to go off and do something else?" In all the cases, the kids said 10,10,10, all the way down the line, no matter what. They were stressing out over everything.

A lot of this comes from not associating with people who can put things into perspective for you, to help teach you how to look at the problems in your life, to realize which ones are important and which ones are not important. If you hang around good people, you begin to pick up a sense of this, even if they don't say specifically what's important and what's not. But the questions they ask, the things they tend to talk about, the way they look at things: You begin to pick that up as well yourself. That gives you a sense of what's major and what's minor in life, where the big issues are and where the non-issues are.

That right there is an important element in working toward stream-entry, toward your first taste of awakening: associating with people who have a sense of what's important, have a sense of proportion in their lives. They themselves have made awakening their top priority. Again, there's a lot to learn from hanging around people like that, even if they don't explain things explicitly. You just pick up habits, ways of looking at things from them. And hopefully when you're not associating with them, when you're off away from them, you can carry their attitudes with you.

I remember the experience of coming to America with Ajaan Fuang and seeing America through his eyes. It was a new place, a very different place from the America I had grown up in, partly because it had actually changed —it had been many years since I'd been back to America—but also because of his way of looking at things. We'd look at the places where I had grown up, the places I had hung out when I was a young adult. From his perspective he noticed different things. I realized that having lived with him, I was beginning to see things in a different way as well.

That's an important part of the practice: finding the right people to be with, who make you see things in more useful ways. As the Buddha once said, the whole of the holy life is having admirable friends, colleagues, companions. That's the first of the factors.

The second factor, listening to the true Dhamma: Again, it's good to know how to tell what is true Dhamma and what's not true Dhamma. But also it's good to know how to listen. When you listen to a Dhamma talk, sometimes there will be things that you agree with; sometimes there will be things you don't agree with. But regardless, you want to listen with an attitude of respect, an attitude of openness, that maybe there is something here for you to learn. You don't have to agree with everything, but if you listen with a disrespectful attitude, often the speaker won't want to talk. Even if the speaker does talk, you may miss something useful. So if you bring some respect to the Dhamma, you have a chance to hear more.

Then you have to decide what's true Dhamma and what's not. That's where the third factor comes in: appropriate attention—learning how to ask the right questions. In particular, the Buddha said the test for true Dhamma is when you put it into practice and it leads to certain results. That's what appropriate attention is: looking at things in terms of cause and effect as they play out in your actions. If you take a particular viewpoint and apply it in your life, what's it going to lead you to do? Will it lead to more suffering or to less? That's the big issue right there: asking questions in terms of the four noble truths. What's skillful and unskillful?

The Dhamma is Dhamma not because you can defend it with rational arguments, or you can put up very elaborate lists of citations that this comes in that passage, and that comes in this passage. Those aren't the criteria that the Buddha mentioned. His first criteria are: If it leads to passion, then it's not Dhamma. If it leads to dispassion, then it is. If you take this as a working hypothesis, what happens? Does it lead you to being fettered, to being tied down with certain ways of thinking? Or does it unfetter you? Does it make you lazy or energetic? And so on down the line.

You learn to look at things in terms of cause and effect. It doesn't matter whether you like a particular idea, or it seems reasonable. The issue is, if you adopt this as an attitude, as a working hypothesis, as a principle in the practice, where does it lead you? If you see that it leads in the right direction, then you practice that Dhamma in line with it.

Ajaan Suwat once noted that this was one of Ajaan Mun's favorite Dhamma topics: practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. In other words, you don't practice it in line with your likes and dislikes. Or you don't say, "Well, because we're Americans, the Dhamma is going to have to change to suit us," or whatever. You're more willing to change yourself to fit in with the Dhamma than the other way around.

You might wonder why Ajaan Mun focused on this. Well, it wasn't the case that everyone in Thailand was already practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. Lots of customs had built up in Thai and Laotian Buddhism that he began to realize were really contrary to the message, contrary to the customs of the noble ones. There was a lot of pressure on him to fit in, in terms of all those customs.

So, what he was doing in taking the Vinaya out into the woods, practicing in line with the ascetic dhutanga practices, was radical. His justification was, well, this is what the Dhamma is. The customs of Thailand, and Laos—or of any country—were the customs of people with defilements. If you want to become a noble one, you can't practice in line with those. You can't practice in line with defilements because that just leads to more defilements, leads to more trouble, leads you away from any hope for awakening. You practice in line with the Dhamma, in line with the customs of the noble ones. When the Dhamma says, "Meditate," you meditate. When it says to be careful about your actions, what you do, what you say, then you're careful. You look at your addictions—whatever the addiction is, things you like to do, like to say, like to think—and view them in terms of the Dhamma. "These things: Do they lead to passion or dispassion? Being fettered or unfettered?" If you see that they lead in the wrong direction, you've got to drop them. You can't side with them. You've got to learn how to side against your defilements. And it really is a matter of taking sides.

If you're interested in awakening, this is how it comes about. You can't clone awakening. I don't know how many books there are about what the awakened state is like. The idea is if somehow you can just grok the awakened state, there you'd be. But it doesn't work that way. You have to work through cause and effect. And these are the causes: associating with the right people, listening to the true Dhamma, developing appropriate attention—learning how to ask the right questions, look at things in the

right perspective—and then practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, rather than in line with your defilements. You do what the Dhamma demands.

That's how stream-entry comes about, that's how awakening comes about, that's how you can put an end to suffering. It may seem very pedestrian, but it is a path to walk. You can't fly to awakening, you can't take a rocket, you just walk the path as it is. You're not too good, you're not too advanced, you're not too whatever, to walk. We all have to walk the path. Once you're willing to submit yourself to the path—i.e., to the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma—that's when you find out what the Dhamma really is, what its real potential is. That's how you answer your questions about awakening.

The Brightness of the World

October 21, 2008

During my first year staying with Ajaan Fuang, he spoke one night of the debt he owed to Ajaan Lee. He said that Ajaan Lee had showed him the brightness of the world. If he hadn't met Ajaan Lee, who knows where he would have ended up?

That statement points to the importance of what the Buddha called having admirable friends: people who show you that life isn't all just grabbing what you can before you die, that there's something noble in human life. There's goodness out there and we can develop goodness inside. As the Buddha once said, there's no other external factor more important on the path than having admirable friends to show you that there is this brightness in life.

We tend to think that the Buddha's teachings focus on the negative side of the world. There's that chant we have: "The world is swept away, it does not endure, it offers no shelter, there's no one in charge." This is a point that even newspaper writers are beginning to admit. I read a column today where the author was saying that here's what globalization is all about: We're all connected and there's no one in charge—as if that were a surprise. As the Buddha continued, "One has to pass on leaving everything behind. The world is a slave to craving." You look around and you can see a lot of the slaving to craving that goes on.

Then there's the Buddha's first noble truth about suffering, which many people misinterpret as saying that life is suffering. He never said that. All he said was there is suffering, and that it's clinging. It's one of four noble truths. But there are other noble truths, too. Life also has the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path to the end of suffering. Those last two truths are the brightness of the world. It is possible to find an end to suffering through what the Buddha called a noble path, noble both in the sense that it leads to a noble truth, the end of suffering, and because the path, in and of itself, is noble. The activities you engage in on the path are

noble activities. So it's important as we practice that we see that there is brightness in the world.

Actually, this brightness is not just in the path to the end of suffering. Any goodness we see in human beings is something we should appreciate, because that gives us the energy to keep on doing good ourselves. This is why gratitude is an important virtue in the path: realizing that you owe your life to the sacrifices of your parents, your teachers, other people who have helped you. It's important that you appreciate that. If you don't appreciate their goodness, it's hard for you to see the value of goodness. If you don't see the value of goodness, it's hard for you to do it.

Even when other people have harmed you in one way or another, the Buddha said to look for their goodness. Even if it's just a little bit, you should focus on that. Because if you can't see their goodness, it's very hard for you to act in good ways, to treat them with kindness and compassion. If all you see are the bad qualities in human beings—their greediness, their selfishness, their thoughtlessness—it's very easy to get sucked into that whirlpool of being greedy, selfish, and thoughtless yourself. For your own sake, you need to focus on their good qualities.

The Buddha gives an analogy: You're crossing a desert—hot, tired, trembling, thirsty—and you see the footprint of a cow in the dirt with a little bit of water in it. You need that water, but you know that if you took your hand and scooped it up, you'd muddy the water, you couldn't drink it. So you get down on all fours and very carefully slurp it up straight from the footprint. Other people's goodness is that valuable. In this case, it's the goodness of the person who doesn't have much goodness. Even to that extent, you have to focus on it.

But if you're angry at someone who really does have a lot of goodness, the Buddha said that it's like crossing a desert—hot, tired, trembling, thirsty—and coming across a huge lake filled with cool water and with trees on the banks. You jump into the lake, swim around, drink your fill, cool off, and then sit under the shade of the tree.

In both cases, notice your position. You need water, so you've got to focus on the water that other people have to offer. If it's only a little bit, you have to be careful about focusing specifically on the goodness, so that you don't mix it up with the dirt. With someone with a lot of goodness, enjoy their

goodness, soak it up, because that's what gives nourishment to your goodness.

There are four qualities the Buddha says to look for in a friend like this. The first is conviction, conviction that your actions really do matter. This is a principle you want to learn from other people: The choices you make really do make a difference, and the quality of your intention determines whether your actions will lead to happiness or not. You want to look for a person who believes in that, because that person is more likely to be kind and generous in his or her actions. At the same time, that person gives you a good example for improving your own attitude.

So conviction is the first quality you want to look for.

The second one is generosity. Look for someone who sees the value of giving. Again, you benefit directly from that, in that you become the beneficiary of that person's gifts. But at the same time, that person sets a good example for you. The world isn't all about taking. Giving is what keeps human society alive. It also develops the qualities you need on the path. As the Buddha said, a person who's stingy can't gain jhāna; a person who's stingy can't attain any of the noble attainments.

You have to see the value of generosity. At the very least, it sets a good example for inner relinquishment. When you're able to let go of things outside—things that you don't really need, things that you can share with others—it helps you to start reflecting on things inside the mind: the defilements you tend to hold on to—or your unwillingness to forgive someone. The best way to overcome stinginess, as the Buddha said, is to give a gift. If you find yourself feeling stingy, go ahead and give a gift to somebody. If you don't have anything material to give, give your forgiveness. It costs nothing and makes life a lot lighter.

Of course, our sense of being wrongly injured by someone else is something that, for some reason, we tend to hold on to very dearly. But it's like that cobra in the Thai folktale. A farmer comes along on a cold morning and sees a cobra lying in the road, stiff with the cold; it can't move. So he takes pity on the cobra, picks it up, and puts it inside his shirt, so that the cobra can get warm. Then, of course, as the cobra warms up, it bites him. It's a good analogy for our sense of having been wronged by somebody else. We keep it warm, we feel sorry for ourselves. Of course, that sense of being

wrongly injured by somebody, wrongly treated by somebody, is going to come around and bite us.

So generosity is a quality to look for in friends, to appreciate in your friends, and then to copy, to emulate.

The third quality is virtue. Look for people who have principles. They know that there are certain things that are beneath them and they just won't do them. They don't want to harm other people, and as a result they have a sense of shame and compunction. Shame has gotten a bad reputation here in the West, the sense of being ashamed of yourself. In Buddhism, it's actually a positive virtue, and it's not a sign of low self-esteem. It's a sign of high self-esteem. You value your virtue. You think of certain things that would go against your principles, and you would be ashamed to do them, because of the pride that comes with your virtue—and it's not a bad kind of pride to have. That's how you cultivate a healthy sense of shame and its companion, compunction: in other words, realizing that there are some things that if you do them are going to have bad consequences down the line, so you don't want to do them for just that reason. As the Buddha said, these two qualities protect the world. They help us to exercise restraint. These are good qualities to look for in someone else, to admire, to value in other people, and to learn how to emulate in your own behavior.

The fourth quality is discernment, the ability to see where your actions are causing suffering and to figure out how to put an end to that kind of suffering. Whether it's on the external level or the internal level, learn to see suffering or stress when it arises, and be able to connect it to its causes. This ability starts with a simple question: "What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?" As the Buddha said, wisdom and discernment begin with this question. Then you look at your actions and see where you're actually causing stress and harm. Because you realize happiness depends on your actions, you want to look and see: In what areas are you deluded?—areas where you don't think you're causing any harm, but you actually are. You want to ferret those out, in terms of what you do, say, and think. That's the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of discernment.

These are the four qualities you want to look for and to value in other people—the four qualities you want to look for in your friends, the people you associate with, the people you open your heart to. There are going to be a lot of other kinds of people in the world you've got to associate with, so

you've got to be very careful about who you open your heart to, who you emulate, who you take as your model.

It's good to be able to look for the goodness in other people, because your own goodness gets nourished. You realize that the world isn't full of people who are just scrambling around, fighting one another.

The Buddha's vision of the world, before he went off into the forest, was of fish in a puddle. The puddle was drying up, and the fish were desperate. There was less and less water, and there were lots of them, fighting over this ever-decreasing amount of water. It gave him a strong sense of dismay.

But fortunately, he realized that that wasn't the whole story of the world. There is goodness in the world. Take that as your nourishment and you realize there's a lot more to the world than just fighting over dwindling resources. It's a world where you're able to develop happiness in another way, through developing noble qualities in your heart.

So when you see those qualities in other people, appreciate them. The people who've been helping you: Show them gratitude. It's by appreciating the little glimmers of brightness in other people's behavior that you begin to see the brightness in the world, the real brightness that grows stronger as you get deeper and deeper into the practice. This appreciation of other people helps keep you going, gives you good examples, and provides you with nourishment all along the way.

A Refuge from Modern Values

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

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

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

The practice of meditation is not just mastering a technique. It's also learning to pick up the right values. This is why the Buddha created the monastic Sangha. Not only is this a community where the monks and the nuns help one another maintain the right set of values; it's also a place where laypeople can learn values from the monks and nuns. The fact that the monastics depend on laypeople means that the laypeople need to have close contact with the monastics. That hopefully causes the values of the monastic life to rub off on the laypeople. The mere example of someone who can live happily on very simple things without a salary, without owning any money at all teaches good lessons to the society at large. It challenges you to look at your values, to look at your life. Which attitudes, which values and ideas that you've picked up from other people really work against your own best interests? It's good to examine those attitudes, because a lot of defilements usually hide behind them.

"Defilement" is one of those traditional Buddhist words that have had trouble finding their way into Western Buddhism. It's a very common word over in Asia. People freely admit that they have defilements, and can talk openly about their defilements all the time. But over here, people don't like to hear about it. This is because we tend to regard our greed, anger, and delusion as our friends. We live in a society where everybody takes it for granted that people are going to be greedy, angry, and deluded, and the society actually is arranged to take advantage of that. It becomes not only the norm but it's also encouraged—as when they tell you that greed is good.

I don't know how many times people have complained to me, saying that if you live content with very little, the economy is going to collapse. Well, if the economy is built on greed, anger, and delusion maybe it should collapse. It's causing people to do unskillful things, to think and act in unskillful ways. It's not good for us. You might say, "How can we live otherwise?" Well, have one foot outside of the "real world" so you can step back and look at these things from a more detached perspective—detached in the sense of looking at them in terms of the larger picture.

There's a chant we often recite here: "I am subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation. And I'm the owner of my actions: Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir." The Buddha says that these are things we should all reflect on whether we're lay or ordained. We should reflect on them every day, remembering that our

actions have consequences, and the consequences are determined by the quality of the intention motivating the action. Once you take this perspective, you can look at the things you "have to do" to get ahead: If they're done out of greed, anger, and delusion, you'd be better off not doing them, because they have bad long-term consequences down the line.

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

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

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

The values and the techniques of meditation go together. This is why it's so important to work on this skill until you really have it mastered—so that no matter what, you can stay with the meditation. This is why your values, the reasons you come to the meditation or your motivation for meditation, have to be more than just relaxation or stress reduction. You have to do it for

your sanity, for your safety, knowing that there are dangers out there. This is why the Buddha stressed heedfulness as the basic mind state underlying all skillful qualities. "Heedfulness" means a very live sense of the dangers that await you out there, all the stupid things you can do if you fall in line with general run-of-the-mill values. It also means having a sense how crucial it is to develop the ability to step back so you don't run with the herd mentality, don't get caught up in the stampede.

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

You have to take a jaundiced eye not only to values out there but also to these false friends inside who are here only to cheat you. They're good only in word; they flatter and cajole; and they lead you to ruinous fun, as we repeated in the chant about false external friends just now. You've got to protect yourself from those dangers as well. They're a fifth column: Mara's armies inside you.

Realize that you have to be very careful about who you choose as your friends, both inside and out. Sit down with yourself and ask, "What do you really value in life? What really is important in life?" Then develop the qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency needed to give yourself the refuge where you can stay true to your values and develop a sense of genuine security, genuine well-being. That way, your values help the techniques of meditation, and the techniques help your values.

So look for admirable friends. When you find them outside, follow them. If you can't find them outside, the Buddha says, go alone, but try to maintain your internal friends wherever you go.

GLOSSARY

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor.

Anatta: Not-self.

Arahant: A person who has abandoned all ten of the fetters that bind the mind to the cycle of rebirth, whose heart is free of mental defilement, and is thus not destined for future rebirth. An epithet for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples. Sanskrit form: arhat.

Avijja: Ignorance of the four noble truths and the skills associated with their duties. Sanskrit form: avidja.

Brahmavihara: Sublime attitude of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity.

Buddho: A meditation word meaning "awake."

Chedi: A spired monument to the Buddha.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action. (2) A phenomenon in and of itself. (3) Mental quality. (4) Doctrine, teaching. (5) Nibbana (although there are passages in the Pali Canon describing nibbana as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: dharma.

Jhana: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. Sanskrit form: dhyana.

Kamma: Intentional act. Sanskrit form: karma.

Luang Puu (Thai): Venerable Grandfather. A term of respect for a very senior and elderly monk.

Metta: Goodwill; benevolence. See brahmavihara.

Nibbana: Literally, the "unbinding" of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. Sanskrit form: nirvana.

Pali: The name of the earliest extant canon of the Buddha's teachings and, by extension, of the language in which it was composed.

Parinibbana: The final passing-away of a Buddha or arahant.

Pasada: Confidence.

Samvega: A sense of dismay, terror, or urgency.

Sangha: On the conventional level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. On the ideal level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least their first taste of the deathless.

Satipatthana: Establishing of mindfulness. The act of being ardent, alert, and mindful to stay with any of four things in and of themselves—body, feelings, mind states, or mental qualities—while putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: sutra.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline.

Wat (Thai): Monastery.