

LOST &
FOUND

Lost & Found

by

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Undirected Insight

November 23, 1995

Coming out to a place like this is very important for the mind, because the mind needs time to get away from its day-to-day issues. The affairs of daily life are like wind blowing across the surface of water. When the water is all ruffled up by the wind, you can't see what lies beneath the surface. So you have to come out to a place like this where there are not that many issues going on, just the very basic issues of keeping the body alive—walking when you need to walk, sitting when you need to sit—so that the affairs of the mind can come more and more to the forefront, so you can stop the wind ruffling the water. The surface of the water calms down and gets still, clear, and smooth. Then you can look down inside, into the mind.

What the mind has to show, it's going to show at its own pace, in its own way. We may have come to the meditation with the idea that we'd like to deal with a particular problem, get something straightened out, or we're going to force the practice to go in certain stages and certain steps in line with what we've read. But as Ajaan Fuang said, "The mind has its own stages, its own steps." Or as Ajaan Lee said, "The ways of the mind are so complex you could never put them into a book."

So we have a very simple technique: You focus on the breath. Be alert and mindful, and stay with the basic technique. When you do that over and over again, the things that are going to come up in the mind will come up, bit by bit, revealing themselves at their own pace. This is where patience comes into the practice. There are some issues you'd like to have dealt with right away, but they don't come up. The mind isn't ready to handle them. So you just chip away at the basic technique.

When things come in their own way, it's like sanding wood: You polish the wood in order to bring out the grain that's already there. If you have preconceived notions of what you'd like the grain to look like and try to paint those designs on the wood, you end up not getting anything that looks natural. You cover up the grain that's already there. But if you simply polish the wood

without any preconceived notions beyond the act of polishing, the natural grain of the wood will come out. The same with meditation: In the process of keeping the mind with the breath, you learn a lot of important things about the body and mind, many of which you didn't expect.

This is why we always have to be open to whatever comes up in the course of the meditation—whatever insights, whatever realizations, whatever issues arise—because a lot of times the things that come up are more valuable than what you thought you were looking for. If you're too busy looking for something else, you won't see what's actually there. So meditation is a training in learning to be very patient with the mind, to be open with it and to see—as you subject the mind to the training—what traits, what characteristics it shows to you. And you've got the basic technique to deal with whatever comes up.

Often what comes up is distraction, which we often find frustrating, but there are a lot of important lessons right there in that process of bringing the mind back. A lot of times we want to be done with it—"When is this problem going to stop?"—because we want to get on to the important stuff. Well, distraction itself is a very important issue. We've got to learn how to master bringing the mind back, because in doing that you learn an awful lot about the mind, a lot of unexpected things about how the mind slips off the breath, how it avoids certain issues, how it cooks up other issues to get in the way of seeing things it just doesn't want to see. In the simple process of bringing the mind back, trying to be mindful, trying to be alert, you catch sight of things you didn't see before. They used to be in the blind spots, but now you begin to catch them out of the corner of your eye as you keep at this very simple process.

As the Buddha said, learning how to deal with the process of distraction can take you all the way to arahantship, when you've really mastered how to do it, when you're really good at it. This is a lot of what the Buddha's teachings are like: very simple techniques, very simple things to do with the mind and the unexpected realizations that come up in the course of doing the technique.

This is one of the reasons why you can't map out the ways of the mind. At the same time, though, you can't think that blindly following the instructions in the meditation is going to be enough. You've got to be as observant as possible, all-around. That's why we say sometimes, "You've got to play with the meditation." You've got to have a sense of experimentation, because often times the things you catch out of the corner of your eye as you're working with a

technique are the important realizations. Those are the things that make a real difference.

So when you sit down and meditate—even though you’ve seen the steps of the path laid out, you may have a general idea of what it’s all about and where it’s going—still, you’ve got to put that knowledge aside. We’re here training the mind, and yet the mind is both trainer and trainee. The map is for the trainer side of the mind—just so that you know in general where you’re headed, where you’re going—but when the mind itself is being trained, you have to put the map aside and just see what’s right there in the present as it comes up. In the course of dealing with the practice, a lot of unexpected things do come up, and you have to be ready for them, notice them as they come.

So stick with your basic technique, but keep your range of vision broad.

And don’t try to define things too heavily in advance. The purpose of the meditation is to become more and more familiar with the ways of the mind. The knowledge that comes with familiarity goes very deep but it comes in little increments. It’s like getting to know a person. You can’t just walk up to someone and smile and shake hands and become friends. You can be friendly at the beginning, but actually becoming friends takes time—to get to know the person’s strengths and weaknesses, sense of humor, the things you can trust him on, the things you can’t trust him on. All these forms of knowledge come in a very indirect way when unexpected events arise and you begin to see that person in a different light—how he behaves in an emergency, how he behaves when you’re in trouble. This is how you get to know the other person. It takes time.

The same with the mind. You focus on the basic technique of keeping with the breath, and eventually you stumble over some really important veins in the mind. They may be veins of gold, veins of diamond, or an old layer of garbage that got laid down sometime way back in the past. But the basic technique is just being here, being observant, watching what happens, and the things will come out layer by layer by layer as they were laid down.

So when you meditate, you can’t sit down and say, “Okay, this particular session I’m going to understand this or I’m going to attain that. I’m going to understand dependent co-arising. I’m going to understand my childhood hang-ups.” That doesn’t get you anywhere. Just tell yourself, “For this breath I’m going to be right here. I’m going to be mindful. I’m going to try to settle down with the breath as best I can.”

There are parts of the meditation you can will, which is why the Buddha talks about them. For example, the type of awareness you develop: You can will to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in; you can will to be aware of the whole body as you breathe out. You can will to let the breath grow calm. You can will to focus your attention on pleasure or rapture or wherever you want to focus it in regard to the breath. Those are things you can will.

That's the difference between concentration and insight. Concentration is a matter of using your will. It's fabricated, as the Buddha says. But insight is something you can't will. Even though you tell yourself "I'm going to be very carefully noting this and noting that," that's a very precise form of concentration. It's not *vipassana*; it's not insight.

The insight is the understanding that comes when you suddenly see things right in front of you, and many times it's not what you were told you were going to see. The real test as to whether it's genuine insight is if it brings the mind to peace. Even when it's genuine insight, you have to let it go when it's done its work and just go back to the technique. If it's something that really makes a big difference in the mind, it can't help but make a difference in the mind. You don't have to memorize it; you don't have to jot it down or try to make yourself see things in that light from then on in. That's a false kind of insight, in which your perceptions cover up the possibility of any new insight's arising right after them.

So whatever comes up in the practice, you take note of it and let it pass. If it's important, it'll shift the ground under your feet. If it's not, then why bother with it? Just let it go. Your one job is to stick with the basic steps of the practice.

This is why the Buddha's meditation instructions are so very simple. He focuses on how you breathe, where you focus your attention, what range of awareness you develop. That's pretty much all the instruction he gives. He gives a few warnings about some of the issues that'll come up and how you should contemplate them. If anything comes up, you contemplate it as being inconstant, as being stressful. Sometimes some very delightful, exquisite sensations come up, and you've got to stay with them until you see where even they are stressful, even they can be a burden, and you can let them go.

If particular problems come up—things like lust, anger, or delusion; sleepiness, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty—the Buddha has particular techniques for dealing with them. But then he has you get back to the breath when the issue has passed, because this is your home base.

The breath, he said, is the most refreshing form of meditation. He compared it to the first rain storm of the rainy season. If you've ever been in Asia during the hot season, you know what it's like when the first rains come. There's been dust in the air for months and months, along with the oppressiveness of the heat. All of a sudden the rain comes and washes everything, cools everything off. The air is suddenly clear like it hasn't been for months. That's the image the Buddha gives for breath meditation. When the breath is refreshing, it'll wash away all unskillful states. So you want to keep the breath as your home base. It may seem a little bit too simple, but that's just the verdict coming from the part of the mind that's planning things and figuring things out in advance.

So just stick with it, stick with it, stick with the breath. What's going to come up is going to come up. It may come up in little bits and pieces, but it comes up as your own insight. Using your own insight is a lot better than using the insight you get in books, because those things are borrowed. You're not always sure you're using them at the right time or in the right place. But when the mind gets to the point where you've polished it with the breath, the insights that arise can be just right for the time and place. And you can test them right there to see if they are. It's a very natural process. It's a process that allows the mind to see clearly into itself, whatever is there. Just don't try to plan things in advance, because you have to remember that we're all operating from ignorance, and our plans and designs on the practice come from ignorance as well.

So you give yourself the technique with a minimum of planning and a minimum of designing. When you stick with it, the things that couldn't come out before, that didn't have the opening, can arise within the mind, at their own pace, in their own time. And they're more likely to be true.

Sensitize Yourself

May 16, 1999

The breath is so close to the mind, and yet for most of us it's uncharted territory. It's like those old maps they had back in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They'd have a cartoon version of the coastline of North America and a big, blank, white space right in the middle, with a little inscription that said, "Here be tygers," "Here be wilde beasts," or whatever. But it's pretty much unknown territory, unknown land, even though it's right next to us.

There's nothing closer to the mind than the breath, yet our focus is always on something a bit farther away. We've actually taught ourselves to ignore the breath so that we can pay attention to other things. Yet the message of meditation is that it's actually much more important to be here with the breath, because it puts you in touch with things that really are important in life.

The breath is like a mirror for the mind. Changes in the mind show up in the breath very quickly. Sometimes you may not be aware of what's going on in the mind itself, but if you're in touch with the breath, then you'll know something's wrong. Say, when anger arises, there'll be a tightness in the breath, a tightness in the chest that wasn't there before. When fear arises, your heartbeat and breathing rate change. So staying in touch with the breath is an excellent way of getting yourself in touch with what's going on with the mind.

At the same time, being in touch with the breath is the best way of staying in touch with how the body's faring. If, when you're eating, you stay in touch with the breath, you get a better sense of when you've eaten too much, or not enough, or when something doesn't agree with you.

What we're doing here is learning to sensitize ourselves to a layer that we've learned to de-sensitize ourselves to so that we can pay attention to other things. Now we come back and we have to unlearn all those habits. It takes a while.

The important thing in the meditation is to set up the right questions. Just ask yourself, "How are things going with the breath right now? When you sense the breath, exactly what are you sensing? How do you know the breath is coming

in? How do you know the breath is going out?” Look into these sensations carefully because they have a lot to tell you.

The guides that are written down, like Ajaan Lee’s *Seven Steps*, are just to get you started. He, himself, when he gave talks on breath meditation, would explore all sorts of other aspects of the breath that aren’t mentioned in the *Seven Steps*, at least not in detail. You might explore one particular step at a time and discover all sorts of new things in there, new implications of what the breath can do both for the body and for the mind. So there’s a lot of territory to explore here. The *Seven Steps* just cover what’s really basic, what’s really essential.

You’ll find that when the mind finally does settle down and you come out and consider, “What happened this time? Why did it settle down so much better than last time?”—if you look at the *Seven Steps*, you’ll find that you had them all covered. Whether you were actively thinking about them or not is not the issue. What matters is that the mind really was keeping in touch with the right center for itself in the body; the breath was feeling just right; the quality of the breath was good; the sense of the breath going throughout the whole body gave a sense of wholeness and fullness; everything in the body seemed to be coordinated; and your awareness filled the body. When you’ve got all those steps brought together—though they’re not one-after-the-other steps; they’re seven factors of a well-balanced mind: When all seven factors are there, the mind settles down. It feels good about settling down. It feels like it’s settling down in a healthy, sound, and wholesome way.

So if things aren’t going right in your meditation, take a mental note. Say, “Well, which of the factors is lacking right now?” Then work on that. As you work on it, you find that often it has more implications than you might have assumed to begin with. What this comes down to is learning how to sensitize yourself, to listen to the quality of the breath the same way a pianist listens to himself play. The more sensitive you are as a listener, the better a pianist you are. The more sensitive you are in listening to the breath, the better a breather you become, and the more the breath can do for you.

So here’s this whole area here in the present moment: the field of energy in which you find yourself sitting here right now. Instead of thinking of the body as a solid lump sitting here, think of it as a field of energy. Your sense of it as a solid lump is based on what you’ve seen, but when you sit here and feel the body from the inside, it has a different quality entirely. If you can get in touch with how it actually feels as opposed to the mental picture you’ve imposed on top of it, you

develop a whole new sense of what's going on here. So you learn to get yourself more and more in touch with what's actually experienced directly right here and now through your sense of feeling the body from the inside. And it's right there that the mind can really settle down solidly.

If you have to visualize the body, visualize it in the ways that Ajaan Lee recommends: Think of the breath energy flowing throughout the whole body, out the pores. In one of his earlier versions of the *Seven Steps* he talked about working with the breath energy *in* the body and then working on the breath energy that *surrounds* the body. There's a field that surrounds the body. If you get in touch with that, then there's a lot more to play with. So there's plenty here to keep you absorbed in the present moment.

Focusing on just these issues accomplishes an awful lot. It gets the mind to settle down in the present moment; it gets you more sensitive to the present moment; it gets the mind more connected to the body in a healthier way; and it helps you learn about the breath energy and what it can do for you.

So you learn to make use of this healthier sense of breathing that comes when the mind is really sensitive to what's going on. Once you're able to settle down with the sensation of the breath energy right in the present moment, you've got a foundation. The trick then is learning how to take that foundation and use it in other contexts as well, not just when you're sitting here with your eyes closed. Stay with this foundation when you get up, walk around, deal with people, do whatever your work may be. Try to be in touch with this flow of energy in the body. It gives a whole new quality to your life.

At the same time, the skills that you're learning here, sitting with your eyes closed, can also be used outside. Being in touch with the breath gives the mind a sense of being at home no matter where it is. Wherever you go, the breath is there. The sense of fullness that comes from learning how to breathe with a sense of the whole body gives a strong sense of nourishment both to the body and to the mind.

And you find that you're hungering less for specific things to happen. Your sense of wanting people to say things like this or act like that gets loosened up quite a bit. When people say things that don't strike you as proper, don't strike you as what you want, then you're not all that upset about it. It's almost as if in the past you were looking for food from other people and you had to accept whatever scraps they spit in your direction. Of course you got upset when they gave you garbage. But now you don't need food from anyone else. The mind is

getting its nourishment right here simply through breathing. So what other people serve up to you or spit at you is no longer a big issue, because you don't need their food. You've got your own food, your own nourishment, right here.

At the same time, you're more in touch with the mind's reactions to things. You'll notice, say, when there's a catch in the breath, a tightness in the chest, a tightness in the stomach, or your hands or arms begin to tense up. You know something's wrong—a new emotion has appeared in the mind.

If you don't have the time to deal with that emotion immediately, you can just breathe through it in the same way that you breathe through any sense of tightness or tension in the body as you're sitting here meditating. It helps to dissipate the antsy feeling that you've got to get that anger, or whatever it is, out of your system by saying something or doing something. You don't have to say or do anything. Just breathe right through the feeling and let it dissipate out. That way, the tense, nervous energy is gone.

Then you have the chance to look at the purely mental side of what's going on. Are you angry? Are you afraid? What's the emotion that made a change in the body? And what's the best thing to do right now? Once you're free from the feeling that you've got to get something out of your system, you can act in a much more reasonable, much more appropriate way.

So the skills that you're learning as you're sitting here meditating are useful in all contexts. It's simply a question of having the mindfulness and alertness and the right approach to the problem that enables you to put these skills to use, to remember them and use them when they're needed.

So this issue of being sensitive to the breath is an important skill: a basic survival skill for the mind so that you can get through life without creating a lot of bad kamma, a lot of unnecessary suffering for yourself and unnecessary suffering for other people as well.

So stay close to home. Don't overlook the potential of what you've got to learn from right here, right now, right here at the breath: the part of you that's as close as life itself.

The Power of the Focused Mind

March/April 2001

The greatest power in our lives is the power of the mind.

For most of us, that power is scattered around, so we don't get much use of it. When it is directed at something, it's usually directed in the wrong place. We start focusing on things that cause us a lot of suffering, cause the people around us a lot of suffering. This is why, if we want to get the most use out of this power, we have to learn how to train it: one, to get it focused in the right way and, two, to apply that focused power to the right issues.

When we're practicing concentration, that's the first order of business: to get the mind properly focused. There are all kinds of wrong concentration that can do the mind a lot of harm. You may focus on thoughts that lead to anger, on thoughts that lead to depression, on thoughts that are self-destructive. That's the most typical way most people focus their minds.

So when the Buddha says to have respect for concentration, he wants you to realize that you've got a very potent tool here, one that you've got to learn to use properly. For most of us, it's easy to get focused on things that are detrimental to ourselves but very hard to get focused on the topics of right concentration. It requires patience.

When the Buddha talks about right concentration, he uses the word *jhana*, which is related to a verb for burning, *jhayati*. Pali has lots of different verbs for burning, but this is the one that describes the burning of the flame of an oil lamp or a candle in a place where there's no wind. The flame is steady, calm, consistent: the kind of flame you can read by. That's the kind of quality you want in your concentration so that you can read your mind.

Most of the time, the mind is like a different kind of fire, burning with the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion. Those are like a burning log. The flames leap around and are very erratic. What we want is to adjust the fuel, adjust the flame, to bring the mind to a still fire of steadiness and still focus.

So we start out small, and you have to protect that small point of focus. You're focused on the point of your nose, the middle of your head, the middle of

the chest, whichever point feels most comfortable. Focus on that point and shelter it from other influences. In other words, other thoughts may come to the mind, but you don't latch on to them, don't let them cause that little flame to waver. Protect it, the same way you'd cup a small flame in your hands when you're trying to get a fire started in the midst of a strong wind. After a while, as you don't pay attention to those other thoughts that coming blowing into the mind, that means you're not feeding them. They begin to go away.

When the fire finally catches, then you can let it spread throughout the body, so that you have that same quality of steadiness and intentness and just-rightness filling your whole awareness. The body is saturated with awareness. The images they use in the Canon are, first, kneading these good breath sensations into the body the same way you'd knead water into a ball of bath powder. Once the whole body is saturated in this way, you just sit there. Here the image is of a well of cool spring water coming up in a lake, or of lotuses totally immersed in a lake, saturated from their roots to their tips with the water. Finally, there's the image of a person sitting with a white cloth covering his whole body. The awareness is bright, fills the whole body, and is very still, with the same kind of steadiness as the flame of an oil lamp, the flame of a candle in a still room.

So you have to look after your stillness. This is called having respect for concentration. One of the verses we chant regularly is "one who is ardent with respect for concentration." There's steadiness in the ardency. It's not that you throw yourself into it for the whole night and then collapse, too tired to do anything for the next several days. You try to maintain a kind of steadiness, breath in, breath out, breath in, breath out, and it's the consistency that makes all the difference.

States of concentration often start out small. You can think of them as little shoots growing up in a path: grass shoots, weed shoots, flower shoots, all growing up in the path. If you're not really discerning, figuring which shoots you don't want in the path and which ones you do, you step on everything. But if you notice, this is an oak shoot, take care of it, because we can use an oak tree around here. It can give shade if it's an oak tree or give fruit if it's a fruit tree: Those are the shoots you watch out for. If you take care of them, water them, make sure you don't step on them, they'll grow.

It's the same with states of concentration. They often start out small—innocuous and anonymous. But if you notice a little state of stillness and focus

on it, then the steadiness of your focus is what allows the concentration to grow. This is why patience is such an important quality.

We all know that we need more patience but we're very impatient about getting those lessons from patience. We wish patience would hurry up and give us patience from those lessons so we can get on to the next thing. It doesn't work that way. You have to take your time—not that you dawdle, just that you're careful about what you do. Then the results grow.

Once the mind is in a steady state of concentration, you want to master it. What you want is the kind of concentration that serves a real purpose, and this is where the issue of discernment comes in. There are lots of uses for concentration just as there are lots of states of concentration you can get into. You want a state that's mindful, alert, fully aware, so that you can use it to understand the problem of why there is suffering in life.

This was the Buddha's great discovery, realizing that this is the best use for your concentration. There are other ways of using concentration. You can use it as a kind of hideaway or to develop psychic powers. All kinds of miraculous things can come from the power of concentration. In fact, there's a huge literature in Thailand of all the amazing things that people with strong powers of concentration can do.

But that's not necessarily the best use of concentration. The first order of business is the issue of suffering. Why is there suffering in the mind? In particular, why does the mind create its own suffering? You'd think if you had any intelligence, the mind wouldn't cause itself to suffer. But that's the whole problem: We're not very intelligent in how we manage our minds.

What you want is to use your powers of concentration, alertness, and mindfulness to look into how the mind is creating its own suffering, where the things are that it's latching onto, where its clingings are. We look for these clingings, because whatever the mind clings to, there are going to be problems as soon as that thing changes. You cling to the body; you cling to feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness, whatever. The clinging in and of itself is suffering.

So this is the prime use for your powers of concentration. If other powers develop, okay, well and good, as long as this one is the first order of business. Look into the question of where the mind is creating unnecessary suffering for itself. Look at the way you relate to your thoughts. Or if pain arises in the body, that's a prime issue right there. The Buddha likened it to being shot by an arrow,

in that the mind creates more issues around the pain and shoots itself with a second arrow.

We're so busy in shooting those arrows that there are n't just two arrows. There's a whole swarm of arrows we shoot at ourselves around pain. We're sitting there with just a little pain in our leg or pain in our back, but we're riddled with arrows. We create all kinds of issues around the pain that just add on to the suffering.

If there weren't that basic clinging to the body to begin with, then the pain in the body wouldn't be an issue for the mind. But wherever there's clinging, you create a bridge for suffering to come into the mind. And you keep on maintaining that bridge. This is what we've got to be sensitive to: that we're constantly keeping that bridge in good order.

Sometimes we drop that bridge but that's because we've built a bridge to something else, and then more suffering comes in from that other source.

And we're always focused on getting things quickly: "Why won't this pain go away? Hurry up and teach me your lessons and go away." It doesn't work that way. First you've got to look at the mind's commentary around the pain, seeing exactly where the issue is within that commentary, where the false assumptions are. This is why having a good solid state of concentration based in the body is so important. It helps get you out of that dialogue in the mind. Sometimes it's not a dialogue, it's a shouting match. There's a whole crowd of people shouting at one another.

But if you're firmly grounded in the breath, firmly grounded in the body, you can just watch this conversation, this commentary in the mind, without getting involved. That's what allows you to see through it, to see which voices are wounding the mind with arrows of the tongue. Then you can disarm them.

The Line of Fire

March, 2002

So much of our suffering in life comes from putting ourselves in the line of fire. The body changes. Feelings change. Perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness: These things are always changing, and no matter how good they get, the goodness deteriorates. They're stressful, inconstant, not-self. No matter how much we try to make them easeful, constant, and self, they just can't quite make the grade. And when we put ourselves in them with our sense of identification—"This is me, this is mine," and we hang on—then we're putting ourselves in the line of fire. It's as if they're shooting arrows all the time, and we position ourselves right in the way.

So what should we do? Our whole experience of the world is form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. We live with these things, so we have to learn how to live with them without getting in the line of fire. We don't try to run away from them, but we learn how to let them go right through our range of awareness without snagging on to anything inside of us. In other words, we practice so that there's nothing inside of us for them to hit. Then it's like shooting through the air. There's a passage where Ven. Moggallana compares his mind to space. He says that no matter how much you try to dye space—trying to make it yellow, white, blue, or any other color—the dye just doesn't stick, for there's nothing there to stick to. That's the state of mind we should be working toward. In other words, instead of sucking these things in, laying claim to them, embracing them, holding onto them, saying, "This is me, this is mine," we learn to pry them from our grasp and not grasp at any new ones.

The reason we hold on is because of our fear that if we don't hold onto them, we're going to fall down. It's like a little child learning to walk, afraid that if he doesn't hold on to his parent's hand, he'll fall down. In the beginning that's the way it is when you're learning to walk, but there comes a point where you don't need to hold on, where you're strong enough to walk without assistance.

This is what the training of the mind is all about. You learn how not to hold on, because it's when you don't hold on, there's no grasping. As Ajaan Lee says,

“When there’s no grasping, there’s no sweat in the palms of your hands.” And when there’s no holding, there’s nothing that anybody can shoot, nothing that anybody can hit. The place where we hold on is where we get hit. When there’s no holding on, the mind is like wide-open space. You can shoot an arrow through space, but you can’t shoot space. That’s the quality we’re trying to develop in the mind.

Now, before we get there, we do have to learn how to hold on skillfully, to skillful things, skillful activities, skillful qualities of mind. You might think of the path of practice as a ladder: You go up rung by rung by rung. You can’t get to the higher rungs without first holding onto the lower rungs. And before you can let go of a lower rung, you have to have another, higher rung to hold onto. Your right hand is holding on to one rung so that the left hand can let go of a lower rung and go up to a higher rung. Then you hold on with your left hand so that the right hand can let go and reach to a higher one—back and forth, back and forth like this. You’ve got to hold on. In other words, there are the precepts, there’s concentration, there’s discernment. You have to hold onto these things to get to where you want to go. Suppose you have a ladder and you want to get up on the roof. You have to hold onto the rungs of the ladder, one after another, until you’re securely on the roof and there’s nothing above you but sky. Then you let go.

The other traditional image is taking a raft across the river. We all like the end of the story where the Buddha says that when you get to the other side of the river you don’t have to carry the raft around anymore. The person who takes the raft and carries it on his head as he walks further is not taking the right approach at all. When you get to the other side you just leave the raft on the shore and you can walk on without any assistance. The part we tend to overlook, though, is that while you’re crossing over the river, you need that raft; you’ve got to hold on to it. If you don’t, you fall into the water and get swept away.

So the trick is learning to give the mind something really good to hold onto so that it doesn’t go out holding onto other things, grasping after other things, thinking it has to depend on this or that person, this or that thing that will end up sweeping it away. What we’re developing here: They seem so ordinary, these qualities of mind. Take virtue, for instance. Virtue is not just a matter of following the precepts, it’s a quality of mind that’s solid in its intentions. You make up your mind that you’re going to avoid evil and then you just stick with that intention. That’s the essence of virtue. The word *sila* in Pali is related to the word *sela*,

which means rock. In other words, there's a solidity to that intention that you hold onto. You don't let it go.

Initially, it may not seem like much, but you find that as you really hold onto these intentions—"not to harm, not to harm, not to harm"—it really protects the mind from a lot of things. You learn not only not to harm people outside, but you also learn how not to harm yourself. And as you don't harm yourself, you find resources of strength in your mind that you wouldn't have guessed at otherwise. Because as long as the mind is harming itself, it keeps sapping its own strength, thinking in ways that get it depressed, thinking in ways that get it fearful, that just drain its strength away. So when you learn to give up those habits, you find resources of strength inside that you wouldn't have anticipated. You can hold onto them.

The same with concentration—the ability to keep the mind on one object, using mindfulness, using alertness, which are really basic, basic mental skills: Again, in the beginning they seem unremarkable. "How could you base your happiness on little things like this?" you might think. But you find that when you really do devote yourself to developing them and you give them priority, then they're right there when you need them. When aging comes, when illness comes, when death comes, these are the things that will be able to help you.

I was often struck by this fact when I looked through funeral books in Thailand. There, most monasteries have loads and loads of books in their bookcases that were published at funerals. It's a custom over there, a way of making merit: Publish a book at a funeral and dedicate the merit to the person who's passed on. A lot of good Dhamma books have been printed that way. Most of the books, as a preface, will have a little biography of the person who passed away. They always come to that part of the person's life—if the person didn't die of an accident—where they say, "This little symptom here, which at first was just a little annoyance, started getting stronger and stronger and stronger. So the person had to finally go to see the doctor, and the doctor said, 'It's this disease.' And the doctors did their very best, but there came a point where the doctors had to throw up their hands and say, 'That's as far as we can help you.'" So, what does a person do then? If the person doesn't have these skills of mind, he or she is totally at sea.

But if you've been meditating, you know what to do. You're mindful of the breath; you're mindful not to give in to unskillful mental states; and you're alert to what's going on in the mind so that, as soon as you catch it latching onto

anything unskillful, you let go. Anything unskillful, anything that would weigh the mind down, you learn to let go, let go. And when the time comes to let go of the body, okay, you've practiced that. You're prepared. Ajaan Fuang often said, "Meditation is learning how to die": learning how to let go of the things you've been holding onto for so long and realizing you don't have to. There's the fear that if we let go of these things, we're going to be totally lost, but, no, that's not the case at all. When you let go of the body, you find that that's not the end. You let go of your concerns, you let go of your worries, and you're actually much lighter. There's a dimension to the mind that just doesn't die, and if you're really alert and mindful in your letting go, you can find it. Even if you're not that alert, at least you protect the mind from falling into bad mental states, and this guarantees a good passing, a good transition. So these little skills, being alert, being mindful: They're enough to really help you if you really hold onto them.

The same with discernment: Develop your ability to see, "Where is there stress?" That's the big issue in discernment, the Buddha said. "Where is there stress in the mind? What are you doing that causes stress? Can you learn how to stop doing that, learn how to let it go?" We feel like we've got to let go of the stress, but that's not what will free you of stress. You *comprehend* stress. You let go of the craving. You let go of the cause, and the stress goes on its own. So the meditation is about learning to look for that craving, learning to catch the mind as it's causing stress through its cravings, through its ignorance. Once you catch the mind in the act, you let go of that act and the craving behind it.

But as long as you still haven't gone all the way to the end, you hold onto that ability to ask the right questions about what's going on in your mind right now: "Where am I causing myself stress right now? Where is the stress unnecessary? What do I stop doing so that the stress can come to an end?" Keep that question in mind. Other questions you can let go, but these are the questions you have to keep in mind.

So you find—as you hold onto virtue, concentration, and discernment—that these qualities get you across. If you hold onto them, you can let go of everything else. You can think of awareness as like a big screen, like the screen on a window: Anything can go right through. Anything that comes at you can go right through. You don't catch hold of it, you don't latch onto it, you don't put yourself in the line of fire. So you find that you have the sense of spacious well-being that comes from being open, but without the dangers and wounds that come from opening yourself up to other things, by putting yourself in the line of fire. You find in this

way that as you're not shooting yourself or putting yourself in the line of fire, the mind has strengths you wouldn't have anticipated, whole reservoirs of strength that you can draw on when you need them.

So don't let the mind indulge in things that would drain its strength. Don't weigh yourself down, because if you weigh yourself down with unnecessary things, it's like weighing down the body: You carry lots of burdens on your shoulders all the time, and no wonder you don't have the strength to do anything else. When you put down the burdens, you find that there's lots of strength there in the mind that you hadn't realized.

So hold onto these practices—virtue, concentration, discernment—because if you hold onto them, you don't have room in your hands to hold onto unskillful things. You find yourself letting go of all kinds of unskillful things you never even knew you were holding onto. And there's no sense of loss. Sometimes there may be a sense of fear around the idea of letting go of certain things because you think you need them. But when you suddenly realize, "Hey, you don't!" it can be surprising, not only in how much you can let go of, but also in how much stronger you are in the letting go.

Then, when you've let go of all the unskillful things in the mind, that's when you can let go of the path, leave the raft on the shore. That's when the mind is totally free. But until then, you want to maintain that sense of commitment to the path, because if you commit yourself to the path you'll find that it's committed to you. It'll be there for you when you need it. It's not like ordinary commitments in the world where you give all your time and energy, and suddenly, "Whoops! There it goes," you get let down. These things don't let you down. We've got the Buddha's word on that. We've got the word of all of his noble disciples to guarantee it. If you look after the path, the path will look after you, all the way to the point where you don't need it any more. And it won't get upset when you finally put it aside.

Exploring

October 24, 2003

As you meditate, one way of sensitizing yourself to the breath is to pretend that you've never experienced having a body before. What would it be like to suddenly find that you've got this body sitting here right now? What would the sensations seem like? Where would you notice movement in the body? Where would you notice warmth? Coolness? Heaviness? Solidity? These are the basic properties we're dealing with as we sit here with the body, getting to know it from the inside.

We've lived in the body for a long time, and we've experienced it through the filter of our preconceived notions of what's going on here. A useful exercise to get past those notions is to pretend that you don't know anything about the body at all. If you were suddenly lifted down from some other, non-physical plane and found yourself in this body, what would it feel like? One thing you'd notice would be the strange flipping back and forth between mental events and physical events; they seem to share the same space right here. It's almost as if you're flipping back and forth between worlds, or channels on a TV: Sometimes you're with the body, sometimes in a mental world. Yet they're both right here, but what you should try to do right now is to keep that reference with the physical world, the physicality of having a body.

When we focus on the breath, we focus on the sense of movement in the body, the energy-flow. When you breathe in, where does that energy-flow seem to start? How do you know when to stop breathing in? When to start breathing out? Explore these things. The more you explore them, the more you get sensitive to what's going on here. Instead of sloughing over things and saying "Of course, of course, of course! I know this," ask yourself, "Well, do you really know it?" A lot of the great discoveries in the history of science happen when people look again in places where everybody thought they knew everything already, and realizing that they didn't.

Think of Isaac Newton. Everybody knew it was the nature of objects to fall. Certain objects fell; other objects didn't fall. The Moon didn't fall, for instance,

which meant, they thought, that the Moon was made of something different from, say, apples or rocks. But he asked a question that everybody thought was a stupid question: “Why do things fall? How does falling relate to other types of motion? What does it mean that it’s something’s nature to fall?” Because he was willing to ask these stupid questions, he discovered gravity and the laws of motion.

So when you sit here to meditate, be willing to ask some stupid questions: “What is this energy-flow? Where is it coming from? How does it start? Where does it end? How many layers of energy-movement do you have in the body? What is your primary sense of the body?” Often we think that our primary sense of the body starts with its solidity, but when you think about it, the movement is what lets us know that we have a body. Without that sense of movement, we wouldn’t know. Which means that the sense of movement is primary; the solidity and shape of the body are secondary.

So allow yourself to think that thought and then see how that thought influences the way you relate to the different sensations in the body. Allow yourself to think the thought that everything you experience is primarily breath energy, and the nature of energy is to flow unobstructed. Do you feel any obstructions? Things you used to think of as okay—that that was the way that part of the body had to be: “It had to be hard right there,” “It had to be held tight right there”: If you experience those sensations as energy, you realize that there’s something wrong with the energy there. It’s blocked. It’s not flowing. So think a thought that simply allows it to flow in any direction at all. See what happens.

You learn a lot of lessons this way. One is that it becomes more interesting to stay in the present moment. Instead of chaining the mind down to just the in-and-out breath, you’re giving it something to explore. There’s something to learn right here, both on the physical side and on the mental side. You begin to see how much your perceptions play a role in how you experience things. When you change the perception, you change the physical experience. Once you allow the breath to do new things in your body, that’s going to change other perceptions about the body as well. This shows you how physical events and mental events influence each other.

When you approach the meditation like this, it becomes a lot more interesting. You begin to see how concentration and discernment come together in the meditation: The questioning is the discernment side; the concentration is looking, looking, looking—trying to be as consistent in your looking as possible.

For most of us, the way we look at the present moment is like a connect-the-dots game. You see a little bit here, and then there's a big empty space where you're going off into some mental world, and then you come back to the physical side of the body, the physical side of your experience and you try to figure out what happened in between. Most often, the little dots are so disconnected that you could make anything out of it: You could make a plane, a duck, or a boat because there's so much empty space and so few dots.

What you're trying to do here as you meditate is to make a consistent line through time. When you do that, you begin to see cause and effect more clearly. The mind grows more stable, more grounded in the present moment. The consistency allows the mind to gain some rest. Otherwise, the mind is constantly hopping around. Even when it lands on something, it's already tensing up, getting ready to hop again, not knowing how long it's going to be able to stay there. But when you give it a place to stay for good, long, consistent periods of time, it can begin to relax, can begin to unwind, loosen up, soften up. That allows you to see a lot more clearly what's going on—all the little bits and pieces that work together to create this sensation of “the body” in the present moment. Instead of just being one big lump, the body is a cluster of lots of sensations. And they can do all kinds of different things depending on how you perceive them.

When you take this attitude toward the meditation, the concentration and the insight go together. The faculty of desire in the meditation—the desire to do the meditation—is given free rein as well. Often we think we should have no desire at all in our meditation, but that's being like a dead person. When you're doing something, you have to want results; otherwise, you wouldn't do it. Desire is considered one of the *iddhipāda*, the bases of success. By giving yourself something to explore—and exploring in a way that gives you a greater sense of comfort, physical comfort, mental ease—that makes the meditation more attractive. It becomes desirable, absorbing. You want to do it again.

So remind yourself as you're meditating that you're not here simply tying the mind down to an object, you're not trying to program it, you're not trying to clone what might be an enlightened state. You're here to explore what's going on. The Buddha gives you the tools for exploration in terms of mindfulness, discernment, concentration, has you ask a few questions—keep them few, don't get involved in too many questions, but just explore what's going on—and see what ways you can conceive of the breath energy that make it more comfortable,

a more attractive place to stay. In that way, your ingenuity becomes a part of the practice.

Use your imagination. You *can* make your imagination part of the path as well. This is another one of those factors we're told to avoid at all costs, but that doesn't work. When things aren't going well, you have to imagine other ways that they might be able to go.

When the admissions people in some of the more advanced universities throughout the country interview candidates who want to be brain surgeons, they have to assume that everyone who walks in the door is smart; no dumb people are going to apply to be brain surgeons. But not everybody who's smart is going to be a good surgeon. So the admissions people need the right questions to ferret out the qualities that make a smart person a good surgeon. At one university, they've found that one of the best questions is: "Can you tell us about a mistake you made recently?" And the best follow-up question is: "If you had a second chance to do it all over again, how you correct your mistake?" The candidates who answer that they can't think of any mistakes are the ones who are thrown out immediately. The ones who say "Oh, I made this mistake the other day, and this is how I'd do it again the second time around": Those are the ones who'd make good surgeons.

Well, the same attitude makes you a good meditator. If you see that things are not going well, you have to use your imagination to figure out what might be another way of approaching things. So imagination here doesn't mean simply wandering off. You apply your imagination to what's going on in the present moment, to what you're doing in the present moment, to get better and better results.

This way, those factors we're told are our enemies—stupid questions, imagination, desire—actually become aids in the practice. As Ajaan Lee once said: "A person with discernment can use anything to a good purpose." And this is how you develop your discernment in the meditation: Take these mental faculties that you're usually told to drop and see if you can use them to deepen your concentration, sharpen your discernment, make your awareness more consistent, make your perception of connections clearer as you explore what it's like to experience this body and mind here in the present moment.

A Meditator's Vocabulary

November 13, 2006

When you meditate, it's good to have a precise vocabulary for what you're doing. It helps to direct your attention to where it should go, helps you to notice things you should notice, and to put aside the things that are really of no importance.

In the Buddha's teaching on mindfulness, he talks of keeping track of the body in and of itself. *Anupassanā* is the word here. It means watching something continuously, seeing what happens to it. For instance, you stay focused on the body in and of itself—in other words, not in terms of how it functions in the world, whether it's good looking or not, whether it's strong enough to do the jobs you have got to do or not, but simply what it's like to have a body in and of itself: what it's like to breathe, what it's like to experience the elements in the body, the parts that it's made of, what it's like to move, what's going to happen to the body as it dies. Just those things in and of themselves: Those are the topics of the meditation. In fact, the Buddha says they're not only the topics of mindfulness, they're also the topics or themes—*nimitta*—of concentration practice.

Then he tells you to apply three qualities of mind to your *anupassanā*: mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind— just that. A lot of times mindfulness is confused with awareness. But the Buddha is very specific. He says mindfulness means the ability to call something to mind, the ability to remember. He illustrates it with the practice of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*: foundations of mindfulness or establishings of mindfulness. In other words, you remember the body in and of itself. When you're keeping track of the body, you've got to keep reminding yourself that this is where you want to stay. It's like tuning into a radio station. There are other frequencies out there, but you want to tune into this one and then stay here, not fiddling with the dial. You're going to stay with the body even though other things come up— feelings come up, mind states come up, mental qualities come up. You're aware of them, but you remember to keep viewing them in reference to how they relate to the body, how they relate to the breath.

If anger arises, watch how the anger affects the breath. If pleasure arises, watch how the breath and the pleasure are related. Don't leave the breath to gobble down the pleasure. Notice that it's there, try to see the connection, but don't let go of your basic frame of reference which, for the time being, is the body in and of itself. Just keep reminding yourself to stay there. That's what mindfulness is about, that mental note that keeps you with your topic, keeps you with your frame of reference.

The actual noticing of what is going on is the duty of alertness. But alertness is very specific. In the Canon it's defined in two ways. One is knowing what the body is doing, how it's moving; the other is noticing how things are moving in the mind, how feelings and perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness are moving in the mind. That's where you focus. It's not your duty to be aware of everything that's happening in the present moment, because that would leave you very scattered, and the meditation would lose direction. The important thing happening right now is what you're doing, through the movement of the breath or the movements of the mind. That's what alertness is concerned with.

Finally, there's ardency, which is defined as right effort. You generate the desire to do this practice well. You're intent on putting forth effort and energy to look for what you're doing that's skillful and what you're doing that's not, to encourage what's skillful and discourage what's not.

When you apply this ardency to the alertness, that means that you look for the movements of the mind that are skillful and the movements of the mind that are not. This is the beginning of insight, the beginning of discernment: noticing not only what you're doing but also the effect of what you're doing. When you focus on the breath, how are you focusing? What are the results of how you're focusing? If they're not satisfactory, what can you do to change? If they *are* satisfactory, what can you do to maintain that state?

So the emphasis here is on noticing what you're doing, noticing the results of your actions. As for other things that are going on in the present moment right now, you can leave those alone. You don't want to notice too many things, because if you do, your attention gets scattered, you lose focus, and you miss what's really important about the present moment, which is how you're shaping the present moment.

This question of what you're doing right now is the basic question in the meditation: Do you really know what you're doing? A lot of the movements of the mind are subconscious. A lot of the movements of the mind are done in

ignorance. Those are the ones that cause suffering. After all, that's the cause of suffering: the things that come out of the mind through ignorance. So when you're told to be alert to what's going on in the present moment, this is where you're supposed to focus, because this is what we're fighting: this ignorance of our own actions.

This is one of the reasons why we focus on the breath, because the breath is very close to our intentions. In the factors of dependent co-arising, the breath is right there, right next to ignorance. *Avijjā-paccayā saṅkhārā*: Fabrications are conditioned by ignorance. The breath is the bodily fabrication. Directed thoughts and evaluation are verbal fabrication. But if you want to see directed thought and evaluation in action, it's good to focus on the thoughts and evaluations related to the way you breathe. That way you bring bodily fabrication and verbal fabrication together. Then there's mental fabrication, which comes down to two things: feelings and perceptions. So you've got the feelings that are related to the breath, and then your perceptions of what the breath is doing in the body, how you label the breathing, which sensations you label as breath, which sensations you label as other sensations in the body. You begin to notice how the way you label sensations in the body can have an effect on how you breathe. When you begin to see the breath as permeating the whole body, when you label the breath in terms of these subtle levels of breath energy, there's a greater sense of ease, a greater sense of well-being. And in the course of doing this, you're noticing cause and effect—what you're doing and the results of what you're doing—right here, right now.

So try to keep these terms straightened out. When they're straightened out, they help sharpen your focus in the meditation. They give you a sense of what you're here for, what you're trying to do, what you're looking for, what you want to encourage, what you want to put aside. Being properly focused like this really helps you gain insight into the movements of the mind, especially the movements that cause suffering and the ones that help alleviate suffering. Those are the big issues, the focal points of what the Buddha taught: suffering and the end of suffering.

You've got your laboratory to test those teachings right here. These different types of fabrication—the breath, directed thought and evaluation, which grow out of mindfulness and alertness together with ardency, and then perception and feeling: They're all right here, so you can observe how you're fabricating your experience, and can learn to do it skillfully.

This is another point that's often missed: Meditation is a skill. It's not a process of simply being open to whatever comes. It means noticing that your actions really do have an impact on shaping your present experience, and you can learn from watching your actions, watching their results, learning to refine how you approach the present moment, so that there's less and less ignorance in what you are doing. That way the meditation leads to the happiness, to the well-being you really want.

Don't Listen to This Talk

January 4, 2007

Don't listen to this Dhamma talk. Focus on your breath, because the Dhamma that you want to know is right there at the breath, where the mind and the body meet. You can observe the mind; you can observe the body; you can observe the events that happen in the mind and the body as they're happening. That's the genuine Dhamma. The Dhamma of words is simply a set of pointers to focus your attention here on the present moment and to remind you of what's worth looking at, to give you some idea of what to do about what's going on. Anything that pulls your attention away from here is not what you want right now. What you want is to observe what's going on in the present moment, to catch the movements of the mind as they're happening.

What are you looking for? Cause and effect. See what things the mind does that lead to happiness, and what things it does that lead to pain. Sometimes you're taught that meditation is a matter of being very passive and accepting, just learning to accept whatever comes up. If you're on a short meditation course, that might be a useful instruction. It helps develop patience and equanimity, which are qualities that we in the modern world lack, so they're useful to develop. But they're not the whole story. You're approaching meditation as a life-long practice. You realize that patience and equanimity are only two of the many skills you'll need to develop in order to see what's going on, to handle what's going on in the proper way. When the Buddha talks about cause and effect, he's not describing a mechanical process. He's asking to look for which causes—which actions you're doing—are skillful, and which are unskillful, to nurture the skillful ones and drop the unskillful ones. It's a learning process. This applies throughout the practice, all across the board.

To observe this, you need not to be just passive. If you were totally passive, you would never learning anything about cause and effect at all. Events would simply just pass by, pass by, pass by, and you wouldn't know what was connected with what. But it is a fact that we can act. We can make choices. We can do things. We can change things. That's what permits us to know cause and effect.

For instance, if there's pain in the body, try adjusting the breath to see how it affects the pain. If you don't manipulate or adjust the breath, you'll have no idea if the breathing is contributing to the pain, or if pain is influencing the breathing, or if they're connected in any way at all. If you change the breath, then you can see, oh, it does or does not have an impact on that pain. It does or does not have an impact on the way you relate to the pain. This is when adjusting is useful—in fact it's important, it's essential to the practice. It's a set of skills you need to develop.

Then as you get more and more familiar with the meditation, you gain a sense of when it's proper to simply watch and when it's proper to do something about what you're watching. So don't be afraid to ask questions about the breath, to change the breath a little bit. Ask yourself: What would be a better breath right now? What would be more gratifying? What kind of breathing would feel good in the chest? What kind of breathing would feel good in the abdomen, in the arms, in the legs, out to the hands, out to the feet? What kind of breathing would feel good in the hip? Explore these things. This way you get on familiar terms with what's going on in the present moment. You're focused on the appropriate issues, on what choices are being made right now and what the results of those choices are.

This is called appropriate attention: *yoniso manasikāra*. As the Buddha said, appropriate attention is one of the most important factors for inducing awakening. There are lots of other things you could focus on in the present moment, but the Dhamma points you to this question of cause and effect, skillful and unskillful. As for other things, you can let them pass, let them pass, because they're not the issue. This principle applies to any problem. If you clutter up your mind with too many facts—with no clear sense of which facts are really crucial to solving the problem and which ones are not—the fact that you're keeping track of so many things actually obscures the problem.

So you don't want to focus on too much in the present moment. At the same time, if you're totally passive, you never solve anything at all. There's no place where the Buddha says to be totally passive or totally uninvolved with what's going on. In fact, it's actually impossible. As long as you're involved in space and time, there are choices being made in the mind. So you want to learn to get in touch with them to see what those choices are, because a lot of them are buried in subconscious parts of your awareness. You want to be sensitive to what choices are being made and to gain a sense of how they could be more skillful.

Meditation is meant not to limit you, but to expand your range of options, to give you a bigger sense of what is possible, of what you can do. So don't let your hands be tied.

If the breath feels comfortable, learn to maintain it. It's okay to be attached to the breath when it's comfortable. Desire can also be a good thing when you learn how to be skillful in what you desire. We tend to think that the Buddha said desire serves no other purpose than to cause suffering, but that isn't true. Skillful desire—the desire to be skillful, to let go of unskillful mental states, to develop skillful ones—is actually a part of the path. It comes under the factor of right effort.

Right resolve, another factor of the path, basically comes down to the desires that grow out of an understanding of the four noble truths. You see that your actions and certain ways of thinking lead to suffering and you resolve not to fall into those ways of thinking and acting. That resolve is a type of desire. It's an intention that you want to act on. It's part of the path.

As for attachment, the Buddha says that when you gain a certain level of stillness in the mind, learn how to enjoy and indulge in it. Maximize that level of stillness. It's something to develop, to cultivate. It's not something you simply note and let pass, note and let pass. Anybody can do that. The real skill lies in learning how to develop these things so you can maintain a sense of ease and carry it around with you. That's the duty with regard to the path: You develop it. Any skillful mental state: You want to keep it going, to develop it further. In the course of keeping it going, you learn a lot about the mind, a lot more than you would learn simply by watching things passively.

So focus your attention right here, on what's happening right now. How does the breath feel? When you perceive the breath in different ways, what does that do to the breath? Can a simple thought let the breath be more comfortable? Does that work? Or do you have to push it a little bit physically? Explore. Learn about these things. There are general principles in the practice, but a lot of the specifics are things that you have to observe on your own.

Right in that sort of observing is where you see the Dhamma: not here in the talk, but here in the actual movements of the mind, events as they happen in the body, sensations as they arise and pass away in the body: how different mental states have an impact on those sensations, how those sensations have an impact on your mental states. These are the things you want to observe. Settling in with

the breath puts you in a good place to observe them, because the breath is basically where the mind and the body meet.

So if you're looking for the Dhamma, if you want to hear the Dhamma, then listen to what the breath has to say, listen to what the mind has to say, when you explore how events arise and pass away. That's where you begin to see connections, to see the patterns of cause and effect. Then you can learn how to nudge them in a direction where the skillful states tend to flourish, and unskillful states fall away. You can develop a sense of ease simply by the way you relate to the breathing. As you get more skillful, you carry that around with you. When you're carrying around a sense of ease, it's a lot easier to be equanimous, wise, to make the right decisions both in terms of what's happening outside and what's happening inside your mind. A certain level of attachment to that sense of ease is actually part of the path.

Learn how to use these things. They can be your friends. They can give you all sorts of help on the path.

So watch what's going on. Keep your focus right here, right here with the breath. That's where you'll find the true Dhamma.

A Mystery & a Puzzle

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There are two kinds of problems in the world: puzzles and mysteries. A puzzle is when you don't have enough facts. There's missing information and you've got to find it. Sometimes it comes down to just a few simple facts, and everything falls together. The other kind of problem, a mystery, is when you have too much information. You're flooded with data and you can't figure it out. The solution lies in trying to pare things down, to figure out which facts are important, and which ones are not.

So the question is, is suffering a puzzle or is it a mystery? It's a little bit of both, more of a mystery than a puzzle, because suffering is there all the time for us to see, whether it's blatant or subtle. There's always something burdening the mind. The question is why? All of the data are right here: issues in the body, issues in the mind. The Buddha said, it comes down to the issue of fabrication, how we put things together, and that's happening all of the time. Every moment has its element of intention. We're not just passive observers. We consciously or unconsciously create a lot of our experience. We're already filtering things out, deciding what to focus on. The reason we suffer is because we're focusing on the wrong things. That indicates that the problem of suffering is a mystery.

To solve a mystery you need some general frameworks, and that's what the Buddha provides with his teachings, specifically the teachings on the four noble truths, which are not just data that you feed into the computer; they're a way of looking at things. They point you to what's important. To begin with, they point you to the fact that suffering is an important problem. Second, they point you to where to look for the cause, which is here in the mind: unskillful desires. These things are happening almost all the time, but there are also skillful desires, which are part of the path to the end of suffering. You have to learn how to separate the two.

The desire to follow the path is a skillful desire. The desire to figure out the problem of suffering is a skillful desire. That's the kind of desire you want to encourage. As for the end of suffering, that's the part you haven't experienced

yet. If you learn how to look at what you're doing, what you're experiencing in terms of those other three truths, ultimately the truth of cessation will appear. This means that you have to learn how to ignore a lot of things that are irrelevant and focus instead on things that you may have passed over in the past to solve this mystery of suffering. Why is it that every action we do is for the sake of happiness, and yet we cause so much suffering? That really is a mystery.

The puzzle part of all this is that there are some events going on in the mind that we haven't really noticed. In that flood of information, there are a few details that we've been overlooking, because most of our attention is focused outside: on things we like, things we don't like, things we're afraid of, things we hope for. It's as if we have a camera that's permanently focused outside. It's never going to take any pictures inside. As a result, what's going on inside the camera doesn't get on the film. No matter in which direction you point the camera, what's inside the camera doesn't get recorded. So we have to learn how to change our focus. This is why we meditate. We want to get used to being right here at the breath, so that ultimately we can shift our focus inside where we can see the movements of the mind.

Luang Pu Dune, one of the forest ajaans, once said that the whole problem of suffering is the mind going out, flowing out: That's the cause of suffering. To counteract the cause, we have to bring the mind back in to look at what it's doing. The flowing of the mind is like an arrow pointing outside all of the time. We let ourselves get fooled by the arrow. It points out there, so we look out. It's like that old game in high school where a group of people would stand in the hallway and stare up at the ceiling, to see how many other people they could fool into staring up at the ceiling as well. What you've got to do is just learn how to look at the arrow and not let your eyes follow it out—like walking up to those people in the hallway and, instead of looking at the ceiling, staring right at them. After a while, they get embarrassed.

So here we are, looking inside, trying to apply the Buddha's framework to what we see, sorting out what is a skillful desire right now. In the beginning, it's pretty simple: Just stay with the breath. The desire to do that is skillful. If you find the mind wandering off in other directions, pull it right back, for the other directions are not where you want to be at the moment. In the course of doing this, you begin to see some of the tricks it plays on itself in the process of wandering off. You have to learn how to see through them. It's going to keep pointing its arrows, but again instead of following the arrows out to look outside,

just look at the arrows and point them inside. Get back to the breath. Get really used to being here.

A while back, someone complained that he had been meditating for many years, and he was still focused on his breath. He was wondering if he was ever going to get to the four noble truths. Actually, focusing on the breath is part of the four noble truths. You're developing the path. You want to be right here all of the time, because this is where you're going to see things. The breath is where the mind and the body meet. All of the issues that are going to come up in the meditation will come up right here.

So you want to be firmly planted here. Get used to taking this as your basic stance, as your basic focus. To use an image from another one of the ajaans, you're cooking the mind, like cooking a vegetable. If a vegetable is still raw and in the ground, it can grow. Once it's cooked, it can't grow anymore. It's the normal habit of fabrication to go out and grow lots of issues dealing with the world outside. But you want to cook those fabrications so that they don't grow anymore. They just stop. What you have then are the fabrications surrounding what's going on in the present moment: the creation of concentration, the questioning that gives rise to discernment, all of the fabrications that make up the path.

You want to approach these in a skillful way as well, because there are unskillful ways of walking the path. For instance, there's the whole question of contentment and discontent. On the one hand, you want to be content with your physical requisites, your physical situation. If you have only a few clothes in your closet, that's really plenty. All you need is one set to cover the body, one set for the winter, and a set for the summer. Anything beyond that is excess. Excess doesn't just take up space; it also takes up your time. You've got to look after these things. Once you buy something, you're suddenly responsible for it. So learn to see that not having a lot of stuff is actually a good thing. It's especially good for the mind. Your affairs are a lot lighter. If you had to pick up and move all of a sudden, you wouldn't have lots of stuff to drag around. Once you've learned to get along on just a few things, you can move around anywhere at all. So with regard to things outside, you have to learn a certain level of contentment.

With regard to things inside, though, the Buddha said that one of the secrets of his awakening is that he never allowed himself to stay content with where he was. We have to understand this carefully. It doesn't mean that he was always trying to move on to the next thing, the next thing, the next thing, because as he

recommends himself, when you attain a certain level of concentration, you have to learn how to indulge in it. You have to stick there, stay there, enjoy it, get to know it well. If you're in too great a hurry to move on to the next thing, the next level of concentration, you lose your foundation. What this means is that you learn how to enjoy the concentration, all the while knowing in the back of your mind that at some point you're going to have to outgrow it. So as long as you're not complacent and you don't misunderstand what's happening, you're okay, because you really need to work on establishing this foundation. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, you want to be crazy about the meditation if you want to do it well. Make it into something that you always want to be doing.

Even as you're going around the monastery, cleaning things up, taking care of things, whatever the jobs you have around here: Don't abandon the breath. Stick with the breath. See where your mind is, what you can learn about the mind even as you're engaged in other activities. This way, the meditation has a chance to grow, even as we deal with our other responsibilities. We don't want the monastery to become so much of a burden that it gets in the way of the meditation, but a lot of this has to do with your attitude. It is possible to stay with the breath as you wash the dishes, as you fix the food, as you sweep up, look after the orchard. Always keep the meditation cooking on the back burner, because sometimes the little details that you want to see, the puzzle parts, will appear while you're doing something else. See the connection between the movement of the mind and the suffering or the stress that it causes. Those connections: Those are the puzzle pieces that are still missing. Sometimes you see them not when you're looking straight at them, out of the corner of your eye.

So always keep it in mind, that this is the issue: There are certain movements of the mind that you haven't noticed. They're right here. This is why suffering is a puzzle: Its causes are happening right here all the time and you're not looking at them. You don't see them.

The Buddha gives you the framework for looking at things. The question of what's skillful, what's unskillful: This underlies everything. The teachings start with the precepts, so that you get a sense of what's skillful and unskillful at a blatant level. You learn how to deal with the issue of noticing when you've done something unskillful. You learn to make the resolve not to repeat the mistake, without getting tangled up in remorse. You realize that all that can be asked of a human being is that you don't repeat the mistakes that you've clearly seen that you've done. You try to develop the proper attitude that helps keep you from

harming yourself and harming others. In other words, you develop this attitude of goodwill for all beings, yourself included. This is how you get the right attitude toward your mistakes, realizing that we have all made mistakes, but we can all learn. You don't want to be constantly standing on your pride, saying, "Well, whatever I do has to be good." That doesn't get you anywhere. At the same time, though, you don't want to be the sort of person who feels that you're a miserable failure with no hope at all. That doesn't accomplish anything, either.

So when you're dealing with the precepts, you want to learn the proper attitude toward your actions and their results—the times when you make mistakes, and the times when you do things well. Learn how to derive energy from the things you've done well. Don't regard it as a fluke when you've done something skillful.

Once you've developed the right attitude toward the your actions through observing the precepts, you've learned a lot of good skills to help your meditation. You have practice in not denying what you're doing; you're not denying the stress that you're causing yourself. This is one of the big traps for a meditator, this habit of denial. If you can avoid that trap, the meditation gets a lot easier. You're always ready to learn. You're not embarrassed or ashamed to look at your mistakes. You know how to deal with them confidently.

In this way, you open things up in the mind, the possibility of finding those missing puzzle pieces. Exactly where is the mind lacking in alertness? Where is it lacking in mindfulness so that you do things in unskillful ways? You begin to see those connections. Once you've seen them, you don't have to tell yourself to remember them. They stick in your mind. You see them very blatantly and you learn from them, resolving that you're not going to let yourself be careless in that way again.

So those are the puzzle pieces. It's both a mystery and a puzzle, why we suffer. You have to be the sort of person who, on the one hand, is able to see the big picture of the four noble truths to solve the mystery, and on the other, to look for the details in the movements of the mind to solve the puzzle. Ultimately, the problem of suffering is no longer either a puzzle or a mystery, and in that way you learn not to suffer ever again.