

The image features a background of a forest with autumn foliage, including trees with orange, red, and yellow leaves. The entire scene is distorted by a wavy, liquid-like effect, creating a sense of movement and depth. A dark, semi-transparent banner is positioned horizontally across the lower-middle section of the image, containing the text "THE FIVE FACULTIES" in a white, sans-serif font.

THE FIVE FACULTIES

The Five Faculties

PUTTING WISDOM
IN CHARGE OF THE MIND

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu
(Geoffrey DeGraff)

“The faculty of conviction, the faculty of persistence, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of discernment: When a disciple of the noble ones discerns, as they have come to be, the origination, the passing away, the allure, the drawbacks, and the escape from these five faculties, he is called a disciple of the noble ones who has attained the stream—never again destined for the lower realms, certain, headed for self-awakening....

“When—having discerned, as they have come to be, the origination, the passing away, the allure, the drawbacks, and the escape from these five faculties—a monk is released from lack of clinging/sustenance, he is called an arahant whose effluents are ended, who has reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, laid to waste the fetter of becoming, and who is released through right gnosis.” — SN

48:3–4

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Preface

In May of this year, members of Le Refuge, a Buddhist group located near Marseilles, invited me to lead an nine-day retreat on the topic of the five faculties (*indrīya*): conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. These are a set of qualities that the Buddha numbered among his most important teachings. When put in charge of the mind, they lead all the way to awakening. Taken together, they deal primarily with the practice of meditation, which makes them a good framework for a meditation retreat. However, the first faculty—conviction—focuses on questions of self and world: what kinds of happiness you believe you are capable of attaining, along with what kind of happiness you believe can be found in the world. This means that the five faculties also provide an excellent framework for covering the entire practice of the Buddha’s teachings, both on retreat and in the world at large.

The talks of the retreat were presented in two series: a series of evening talks on the five faculties, and a series of morning talks on practical issues arising in meditation, treating them in light of the five faculties. Every afternoon, there was a period for questions and answers concerning issues arising from the talks and from the retreatants’ experiences in meditation.

The present book is based on both series of talks along with some of the questions and answers taken from the Q&A periods, presented chronologically. In a few cases, questions have been taken out of order and placed immediately after the talks to which they seem most clearly related. The talks, questions, and answers have been edited and expanded so as to make their coverage of the main topics of the retreat more complete than I was able to manage on the spot.

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

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

Mun, spent more time training under one of Ajaan Mun's students, Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo.

Many people have helped with the preparation of this book. In particular, I would like to thank the people of Le Refuge who made the retreat possible; my interpreter, Khamano Bhikkhu (Than Lionel); and Philippe and Watthani Cortey-Dumont, who hosted my entire stay in France. Here at Metta, the monks at the monastery helped in preparing the manuscript, as did Addie Onsanit, Nathaniel Osgood, and Isabella Trauttmansdorff. Any mistakes in the book, of course, are my own responsibility.

Thānissaro Bhikkhu
(Geoffrey DeGraff)

Metta Forest Monastery
October, 2017

Abbreviations

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|----|-------------------------|
| AN | <i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i> |
| DN | <i>Dīgha Nikāya</i> |
| MN | <i>Majjhima Nikāya</i> |
| SN | <i>Samyutta Nikāya</i> |

References to DN and MN are to discourse (*sutta*); those to AN and SN are to section (*nipāta*, *saṃyutta*) and discourse. Numbering for AN and SN follows the Thai Edition of the Pāli Canon.

All translations from these texts are by the author and are based on the Royal Thai Edition of the Pāli Canon (Bangkok: Mahāmakut Rājavidyālaya, 1982).

Introduction

April 22, 2017

Good evening and welcome to our retreat. It's always a pleasure to be here meditating together with you. I hope the retreat is beneficial for everyone.

The theme of the retreat will be the five faculties: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. The Buddha taught these qualities as among the most important for attaining awakening. Not only that, he also noticed in his own practice that they would lead to success in whatever he would put his mind to. So they're qualities useful in any attempt to do anything of importance in your life. Their primary focus is on the practice of meditation, but the first faculty, conviction, deals with how you view the world and how you live within the world. For that reason, it's an aid in training your mind in all the aspects of the practice that surround meditation.

The five faculties are listed in the order in which they ordinarily develop. You begin with conviction because conviction deals with your views about what's possible in terms of your self and of your world. In terms of the world, you're convinced about what is possible and desirable to strive for. In terms of your self, conviction deals with what you believe you are capable of doing. In the Buddha's teachings, we're looking for a happiness that goes beyond anything we've known before, and so it's important to have a sense of the world that allows for that happiness, and a sense of yourself as capable of finding it. Because this happiness is beyond the ordinary, you can't know whether it's possible until you've reached it, which means that the beliefs that help you reach it have to rank as a matter of conviction, and not of true knowledge. They become knowledge only when they've produced the desired results.

Building on conviction, you then put forth the persistent effort to develop within yourself whatever's going to be skillful on the path and to abandon anything unskillful that will get in the way of the path.

Mindfulness is what remembers what's skillful and what's not skillful. It also remembers what to do with skillful qualities and unskillful qualities when they are present in the mind—and how to develop skillful qualities when they aren't.

Concentration builds on persistence and mindfulness in that, when skillful

qualities are fully developed, they lead the mind to a state of stillness and peace, together with a sense of deep inner well-being. The stillness then allows you to detect things in the mind that you can't notice when it's running around. The sense of well-being gives you the strength needed to nourish the mind in order to keep on the path.

Supported and nourished in this way, discernment then checks the results of what you're doing to see how they can be improved. In this way, it then feeds back into the other qualities as well, strengthening your conviction, persistence, mindfulness, and concentration. In the Buddha's image, the first four qualities are like the rafters you put up to support a roof, while discernment is the ridgepole that connects them all and makes them firm. The ridgepole relies on the rafters but it also ties them together so that they're solid and tight.

These five qualities are also called strengths. The difference between "faculty" and "strength" lies in the intensity. The Pāli word for faculty, *indrīya*, is related to Indra, the king of the gods. When something is a faculty in the mind, it's in charge. You can think of the mind as being like a committee. A strength is a strong member of the committee, whereas a faculty is someone who has taken over the committee and runs it.

When you think of the mind as a committee, it's important to realize that each member of the committee consists of what the Buddha calls a *bhava*, or becoming. A becoming is an identity that you take on in a particular world of experience. This can refer to your identity as a human being in the physical world around us, or to the identities you assume within the thought-worlds of your mind. In fact, one of the Buddha's discoveries was that the identities you assume in your thought-worlds will have an impact on the identities and worlds you assume after death.

Both the identity and your sense of the world depend on a desire. For example, if you want to have some lavender honey, the world that's relevant to your desire centers on the place where lavender honey is available right now. From there it spreads to cover whatever is conducive to your getting the honey, as well as whatever's getting in the way of your going there. At the moment, the monks sitting in front of you are an obstacle because you're not going to get out of here until I've finished talking. So we're a relevant part of that world. Your sense of identity in that world is composed largely of two things: your self as the consumer of the honey, and your self as the producer or provider of the honey. Your self as consumer centers on your stomach and your tongue. Your self as provider centers on whatever abilities you have that will get the honey: your body and, if there's no lavender honey here in the monastery kitchen, your car and your wallet.

Other becomings will take other parts of you and make them important. Suppose, for instance, that you want to win an argument. Your stomach at that point is not important. Your brain becomes more central in terms of what you're

identifying with. And your sense of the world will focus, not on the lavender honey store, but on the people you're arguing with and the topic you choose to argue about.

The basic principle in every becoming, though, is that your desire shapes both you and the world you experience.

In addition to desire, the Buddha saw—in the second knowledge he gained on the night of his awakening—that becoming is also shaped by two other factors: your *views*, which the Buddha equated with the way you pay attention to the world; and your *actions*, which he equated with your intentions. Your views are basically value judgments as to what's worthwhile and what's a good way to attain it. These then influence how you act, through the way you formulate intentions based on these views and act on them.

In acting on these intentions, we also change ourselves and the world in which we inhabit, both right now and on into the future. This means that we and our world are processes. Sometimes these processes achieve the results we want; sometimes they don't. In other words, although the world is changeable, it's not totally malleable. And the reason we suffer is because we don't understand the patterns by which processes actually work.

For example, suppose you're addicted to alcohol. You want to have the pleasure that comes from the alcohol but you don't want the bad effects that come from being alcoholic. Sometimes you can connect cause and effect in your mind and learn from that fact, which helps in overcoming your addiction, but sometimes you don't—which means you keep going back.

Now, the processes of becoming always entail suffering and stress. Unskillful becomings create blatant stress, but even skillful becomings create stress on a more subtle level. This means that your ability to gain awakening and to put an end to suffering will mean going beyond becoming altogether: going beyond your sense of your self and your sense of the world. However, to get there, you have to create good states of becoming. Why? Because the path requires developing, not just letting go. We need an environment that's conducive to practice, along with a set of qualities in our thoughts, words, and deeds that lead to awakening. This requires that we also develop a sense of ourselves as capable of shaping ourselves and the world in the right direction, along with a way of nourishing ourselves on the path.

To develop all these things requires desire, the desire around which you build a world in which awakening is possible and a sense of self that's conducive to achieving awakening. Because we want a happiness that goes beyond the ordinary, it requires that we develop skills that go beyond the ordinary as well. These skills consist of the five faculties which, because they are based on desire, are forms of becoming. They're special forms of becoming, though, in that—in the course of developing these skills—they enable you to understand what the process of

becoming is and how it works. They also teach you how to take the processes of becoming apart, so that you can get past unskillful becomings and then, when the time is ripe, go beyond all becomings altogether.

The reason we need to put the faculties in charge of the mind is because, when you make up your mind to practice, you find that the entire mind is not in full agreement. Some of the members of the committee are waiting to sabotage your practice so that they'll be free to pursue other desires. So the question is: Who's in charge here? Your moods? How can you trust them? They get you to do things and then they disappear. They're like people who get you to break the law but then, when the police come to catch you, they run away. If you identify with these moods, you can't even trust yourself, much less anyone else.

If you look outside for someone to trust, in terms of the beliefs you absorb from other people, whom do you trust to be in charge of defining your world? The media? The education system? The Internet? What do they know about how to go beyond aging, illness, and death?

This week we're going to be looking instead at the Buddha as someone you can trust—someone who says that there is a way to go beyond aging, illness, and death, and who shows you how to do it. In particular, he gives you advice on how to develop the five strengths of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment so that you put your wisdom in charge of defining who you are and the way you interpret the world in which you live. When these five strengths reach the point where they dominate the mind—in other words, when they become faculties—then you can trust yourself to act in your own best interest.

In addition to building on desire, these five faculties also deal directly with the other two elements that go into becoming: your views and the way you pay attention on the one hand, and your actions and intentions on the other. Two of the faculties, conviction and discernment, relate primarily to your views and to acts of attention. Three of them, persistence, mindfulness, and concentration, relate primarily to your intentions and actions.

All of them are based on heedfulness: the realization that because your actions make a difference between happiness and suffering, you have to be very careful about what you do. If you really love yourself and love others, you won't do anything to harm yourself or to harm anyone else. You can't just sit back and watch unskillful committee members take over the mind. You have to be proactive in strengthening the mind's skillful members. Ultimately, the five faculties bring the mind to a happiness that has no need for desire, no need for becoming, so at that point, even the faculties get transcended. But to get there, we have to do the work of giving rise to these faculties in our thoughts, words, and deeds. That's the purpose of our retreat.

The organization of the retreat will be like this: In the morning, we'll have some short talks on meditation. In the afternoon, we'll have more silence with at least one session devoted to questions and answers. There will be little slips of paper on which you can write questions that you can then place in the bowl here. In the evening, we'll have talks on the five faculties. We'll talk about the faculties in their standard order, but remember that in practice, they help one another along. So even though discussions on discernment don't come until the end of the week, you'll notice that we'll have to bring discernment to developing the other faculties as well. And even though the faculties of mindfulness and concentration won't come for several days, it's good to have practical experience in developing them beforehand. So now we'll meditate to give you the practical basis for understanding the more formal discussions when they come.

GUIDED MEDITATION

So. Find a comfortable position. Sit up comfortably straight, place your hands in your lap, face forward, and close your eyes.

And think thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill is a wish for happiness—a wish for true happiness, both for yourself and for other people. When we wish goodwill for ourselves and for others, we're basically wishing that we and other people will understand the causes for true happiness and act on them. And this is a thought you can spread to anyone, even people who are doing unskillful things, very unskillful things, creating a lot of damage to the world. You're basically wishing that they will stop and have a change of heart, which means that goodwill is something that you can spread to everyone without hypocrisy.

We think these thoughts at the beginning of the meditation because true happiness comes from within. It comes from developing the good potentials of the mind through the skills we master in meditation. This is why there's no conflict between your true happiness and anyone else's true happiness. So when you pose the thought in your mind, "May I be happy," it's not a selfish thought. The more you're able to develop your own inner skills, the more you will have to offer to other people as well. This is why goodwill can be developed as an unlimited attitude.

So pose that thought in your mind for a few minutes: "May I be truly happy. May I come to understand the causes of true happiness. And may I be able to act on them."

Now spread the same thought to others. Start with people who are close to your heart: to members of your family, and to very close friends. May they find true happiness, too.

Then spread the same thought out in ever-widening circles:
to people you know well and like,

to people you like even though you don't know them so well,
to people you're more neutral about,
and to people you don't like.

Remember that the world would be a much better place if everyone could find true happiness inside.

Spread thoughts of goodwill to people you don't even know. And not just people: living beings of all kinds, in all directions—east, west, north, south, above, and below, out to infinity. May we all find true happiness in our hearts.

Now bring your attention to the breath. The word “breath” here doesn't mean just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It also means the flow of energy throughout the body, which exists on many levels. On the most obvious level, it's the flow of energy that allows the air to come in and go out of the lungs. But it also includes the flow of energy in the nerves and the blood vessels, out to every pore.

So take a couple of good long, deep in-and-out breaths and notice where you feel the breath energy. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn't feel good, you can change the breath. There are two ways of changing it. One is to consciously experiment with different kinds of breathing: long, short, fast, slow, deep, shallow, heavy, light, or any combination of those. Try various ways of breathing to see what feels best for the body right now. When you've found a rhythm and texture of breathing that feels good, stick with it for as long as it continues to feel good. If the needs of the body change, then allow the breath to change in line with them. Try to be as sensitive as you can to learn the signs in the body indicating what way of breathing will serve it best.

The other way to change the breath is to consciously pose the question in mind, each time you breathe in: “What would feel really good right now?” And see how the body responds on its own.

If any thoughts not related to the breath grab your attention, just drop them and you'll be right back at the breath. If the mind goes wandering off 10 times, 100 times, bring it back 10 times, 100 times. Don't get discouraged. Just keep letting the thoughts go, letting them go. And you don't have to chase them away. Even though a thought unrelated to the breath may appear in the mind, you can still feel the breath. Stay with that sensation.

Each time you return to the breath, reward yourself with an especially gratifying breath. That way the mind will be more and more inclined to keep coming back to the breath and more willing to stay there.

If there are any pains in the body, don't focus on them. Focus instead on the opposite side of the body. That is to say, if there's a pain in the back, focus on the front of the torso. If there's a pain on the right, focus on the left.

When the breath gets comfortable, there's a danger that you might start leaving the breath to follow the comfort, but that will destroy the foundation for the sense of comfort, which is your continued focus on the breath.

So to counteract that tendency, the next step is to breathe in and out aware of the entire body. And the first step in that direction is to survey the sensations of the breath in the different parts of the body, section by section.

Start down around the navel. Locate that part of the body in your awareness. Watch it for a while as you breathe in and breathe out to see what kind of breathing feels good there. If there's any tension or tightness there, allow it to relax and dissolve away, so that no new tension builds up as you breathe in, and you don't hold on to any tension as you breathe out. If it helps in dissolving the tension, think of the breath energy entering and leaving your body right at the spot where you're focused, so you don't have to create tension by trying to pull energy from anywhere else in the body. As the patterns of tension begin to dissolve away, try to notice if there are any more subtle patterns of tension, and allow those to dissolve away as well.

Now move your attention over to the right, to the lower right hand corner of the abdomen, and follow the same steps there. One, locate that part of the body in your awareness. Two, watch it for a while as you breathe in and breathe out to see what kind of breathing feels good there. And three, if there's any sense of tension or tightness there, allow it to relax.

Now move your attention over to the left, to the lower left hand corner of the abdomen, and follow the same three steps there.

Now bring your attention up to the solar plexus, right at the tip of the breastbone, and follow the same three steps there.

Now bring your attention over to the right, to the right flank.

And then to the left, to the left flank.

Then bring your attention to the middle of the chest. Try to be especially sensitive to how the breath energy feels around the heart, and breathe in a way that feels soothing there.

Now bring your attention to the right, to the place where the chest and the shoulder meet.

And then to the same spot on the left.

Now bring your attention to the base of the throat.

Now bring your attention to the middle of the head. As you breathe in and out, think of the breath energy coming in and out of the head from all directions, not only through the nose, but also through the eyes, the ears, in from the back of the head, down from the top of the head, going deep, deep, deep into the brain, gently dissolving away any patterns of tension you may feel anywhere in the head: around

the jaws, around the forehead, around the eyes, at the back of the neck.

Now bring your attention to the base of the neck, right at the base of the skull. As you breathe in, think of the breath energy entering there from the back and spreading down through the neck, down the shoulders, the arms, out to the tips of the fingers. As you breathe out, think of it radiating out from all those parts of the body into the air.

As you get more sensitive to these parts of the body, if you see that one side is holding more tension than the other, relax that side and try to keep it relaxed, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-.

And as obvious patterns of tension begin to relax in these parts of the body, try to become more sensitive to detect subtler patterns of tension that were obscured by the more obvious ones. Allow even the slightest tension that you can detect to relax.

Now, keeping your attention focused on the back of the neck, this time as you breathe in think of the energy entering there and then going down both sides of the spine all the way down to the tailbone. Then as you breathe out, think of it radiating out from the entire spine into the air. And again, if you notice that there's more tension in one side of the back than the other, allow that side to relax. And try to keep becoming more and more sensitive even to the slightest patterns of tension in this part of the body. When you sense them, allow them to relax.

Now bring your attention down to the tailbone. As you breathe in, think of the energy entering there and going down through the hips, the legs, to the tips of the toes. And then as you breathe out, think of the energy radiating out from all those parts of the body into the air. And again, if there's more tension in one side of the body there than the other, allow that side to relax. And keep it relaxed, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. As you're staying here, try to become sensitive to ever more and more subtle patterns of tension so that you can dissolve those away, too.

That completes one cycle of the survey of the body. If you want, you can go through the body again to pick out any patterns of tension you may have missed the first time around. Keep this up until you're ready to settle down.

Then choose any one spot in the body that seems most congenial or most interesting. Allow your attention to settle there and then to spread out to fill the whole body, so that you're aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. As your awareness spreads, think of it as exerting no pressure at all on your body. It's like the light of a candle in an otherwise dark room: The flame is in one spot, but the light fills the entire room. Or like the spider in the middle of a web: The spider is in one spot, but it's sensitive to the whole web. Try to maintain this sense of centered but broad awareness all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. Maintain this quality of awareness as long and as steadily as you

can. Try to master it as a skill. Your attention will have a tendency to shrink, especially during the out-breath, so each time you breathe in and out remind yourself, “Whole body, whole body.” Allow the breath to find whatever rhythm feels best. Your duty is simply to maintain this centered but broad awareness.

There’s nowhere else you have to go right now, nothing else you have to do, nothing else you have to think about. This awareness is healing for the body and healing for the mind. It’s like a medicinal cream for curing a rash on your skin. For it to work, you have to leave the cream on the skin. If you put it on and then wipe it off, it can’t have any effect. This is why it’s good to develop this type of awareness for a long time. Because it’s still and all-around, it’s a good foundation for insight to arise. But don’t worry about the next step in the meditation, or when the insights will arise. They’ll arise as this quality of awareness matures. Right here. Give it time.

(Meditation)

Before leaving meditation, remember that there are three steps to leaving properly.

The first is to ask yourself, “At what point in the meditation was the mind especially well-centered, still, and comfortable? Especially clear?” Then ask yourself, “Where were you focused at that point? What was your breath like? What had you been doing leading up to that point?” If you can remember these things, try to keep them in mind and see if you can apply them to the next time you meditate, to recreate the same conditions and get the same results. Now it may happen that you don’t get the same results, but that simply means that you need to be more observant the next time around. Gradually you’ll become more adept at noticing what’s worth paying attention to, and what’s not. It’s in this way that the meditation becomes a skill.

That’s the first step.

The second step is to think of whatever sense of peace or well-being you’ve felt during this session and dedicate it to others, either to specific people you know are suffering right now or to all living beings in all directions: May we all find peace and well-being in our hearts.

The third step is to remember that even though you open your eyes, you can still be aware of the breath energy in the body, as you get up, walk around, whatever you do: Try to stay as fully aware of this breath energy as continually as you can. It may be asking too much to try to focus on the in-breath and the out-breath all the time, but just try to be aware of the quality of the breath energy in the body, and release any patterns of tension that you may detect, as soon as they arise, in the course of the day. This way you provide yourself with a good foundation for observing your mind as you go through the day. It also provides you with a sense of being grounded in your daily activities. This helps build up the momentum of your practice.

See if you can maintain this full body awareness until the next time that you sit

down to meditate. That way, the next time you sit down to focus on the breath, you'll be right there.

It's like keeping a dog on a short leash. When you want it to come, it's right there. Otherwise, if you drop your awareness of the breath energy, it's like keeping your dog on a very long leash. It will wrap the leash around other people's legs, lampposts, trees—all kinds of things. When you want it to come back, you'll have to unwind the leash, which takes a very long time. So try to maintain this awareness of the breath energy as part of your whole day.

And with that thought, you can open your eyes.

Are there any questions before we break for the night?

Q: Is effort the same thing as persistence?

A: They go together. We want an effort that can maintain itself and not get exhausted and so, as we'll find, sometimes it will require a lot of effort and sometimes just a little bit of effort. But the consistency is the important part.

Q: How are the five faculties related to the noble eightfold path? Do they, for example, come at the beginning?

A: They're actually a different way of expressing the noble eightfold path. Conviction is related to what's called mundane right view, persistence is related to right effort, mindfulness is related to right mindfulness, concentration is related to right concentration, and discernment is related to the noble level of right view and right resolve. As we will see, conviction is also related to right speech, right action, and right livelihood as well. So the five faculties are simply another way of expressing the eightfold path.

Okay, we'll break for the night. Did you receive the piece on maintaining silence during the retreat? We should have added a reference to screens: computer screens, telephone screens, iPad screens. Try to look at as few screens as little as possible, especially tomorrow. We will ask Bernard to announce the election results tomorrow night. Between now and then, try not to think about the election. Think instead of this story from the Canon:

King Pasenadi once went to visit the Buddha in the middle of the day, and the Buddha asked him, "What have you been doing today?" The king, very frankly, said, "Oh, the typical concerns of a person who is obsessed with power." So the Buddha asked him, "Suppose that a trustworthy man came from the East, saying that there's an enormous mountain moving in from the East, crushing all living beings in its path. Another trustworthy man comes from the South, saying that there's another mountain moving in from the South. Another man comes from the West, same news. Another man from the North, same news: altogether, four mountains moving

in from the cardinal directions, crushing all living beings in their path. Considering that human life is so hard to attain, what would you do?” And the king answered, “What else could I do? Just calm my mind and practice the Dhamma.” So the Buddha said, “I inform you, great king, aging, illness, and death are rolling in on you. So what should you do?” And the king said, “What else can I do? Calm my mind and practice the Dhamma.” So it doesn’t matter which politicians will be riding the mountains: The mountains are still moving in. So what should you do? Calm your mind and practice the Dhamma. Bonne nuit.

Issues with the Breath

April 23, 2017

This morning I'd like to make a few remarks on problems that can sometimes come up as we're trying to focus on the breath.

One of the problems is that, when we focus on the breath, we tend to tighten up at the beginning or the end of a breath to make a sharp line between the in-breath and the out-breath. That makes the breathing uncomfortable. So, allow the in-breath and the out-breath to flow smoothly into each other.

Another problem is that sometimes you feel difficulty in breathing. This is a problem of perception. If you think of the breath wanting to come into the body and that it can come in from any direction at all, then you'll find that the breathing goes much easier. Also, the breathing feels easier when you think of yourself as being in the middle of the breath, being bathed by the breath, rather than off to one side or behind it. You can also change your mental image as to where the breath enters the body. If you find after a while that your shoulders or your chest are getting tired, think of the breath coming in someplace else besides the nose: for example, from the back.

Years back when I was in Thailand, I had malaria. One of the problems with malaria is that your muscles start getting deprived of oxygen, because the malaria parasites are eating your red blood cells. After several days, I found that the muscles doing the breathing were getting very tired. Then I remembered Ajaan Lee's instructions: The breath can come in the middle of the forehead or down from the top of the head. So I changed my perception, thinking of the breath coming in, not through the nose, but through other spots in the head. As a result, the muscles that had been overworked had a chance to rest. So if, after a day of conscious breathing, you find that certain parts of the body get tired, change the image.

That's one set of problems that can come up.

The other set of problems has to do with your image of the breath energy in the body. For many people, this is a very strange or exotic notion, but actually it's something very directly present to your awareness: your sense of the body as you feel it from within. It's simply a matter of interpreting what you already feel in a different way. If you were to hold out your arm, the sensations that tell you that you have an

arm there could be interpreted as perceptions of solidity or as perceptions of breath energy. The choice is yours. The sensations are the same, but the perceptions—and what you can do with the sensations based on the perception—will be different. The advantage of seeing the sensations as energy is that you can do things with energy that you cannot do with solidity. For example, if there's a spot in your back that you think of as solid, you will simply leave it as solid. However, if you perceive it as energy and you realize that the energy is blocked, then you can do something about it. You can relax it or open it up to release it, and this allows the breath to become more comfortable. Your posture can improve and you can sit comfortably for longer periods of time.

It's like those old magic eye pictures that were popular 25 years ago. If you look at them one way, they're two-dimensional patterns. If you change your brain and look at them another way, you'll see them as a different pattern entirely. What was two-dimensional now becomes three-dimensional. Now with those images, it was simply a perceptual trick with no practical consequences. But with the body, you can actually give yourself an advantage, depending on how you perceive the sensations. Once you become sensitive to these sensations as energy, then the breathing will become easier. Instead of thinking that you have to force the energy through a solid, you simply think of one energy flowing into and mingling with another, and in that way, good energy can penetrate deeper into the body. That makes it easier to be aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, with a sense of well-being.

Once you gain a sense of the body as being energy, then the next problem becomes your tendency to push the energy in one direction or another. Energy is not something you can put pressure on. If it responds to pressure, then it's actually the liquid in the body, such as the blood or the lymph. You may find yourself pushing the blood into different parts of the body and then it gets stuck. Two main areas where it tends to get stuck are in the head and in the chest. If you find that the pressure is building up in your head, it's a sign that you're pulling the energy and the blood up in the body as you breathe in. To counteract that tendency, you can think of the energy going down the back of the neck when you breathe in, all the way down the back to the tailbone and then down into the ground. Or you can think of the energy going down the front of the neck, down into the heart, and then out into the air. If the energy is building up in the chest, think of the energy flowing out the arms through the palms of the hands or the spaces between the fingers.

There was a famous Zen master, Hakuin, who suffered from what he called Zen sickness, which was simply the energy building up too much in the head. His way of dealing with it was to imagine a large ball of butter placed on top of his head, with the butter melting down his head, down the back, down the front of the body—both while he was breathing in and while he was breathing out. If you find that perception

helpful, go ahead and use it. Ajaan Fuang suffered from headaches when he was a young monk. He found that a good way to deal with them was to think of the energy going down the spine, out the tailbone, and penetrating deep down into the earth. That relieved the pressure in his head.

So when dealing with energy, there's a lot to play with. If you have a chronic pain in some part of the body, think of the energy flowing through the area of the pain and then flowing out either the palms of the hands or the soles of the feet. That will feel healing and relaxing around the area of the pain. When I was a young monk, I found that I had a very strong sense of blockage in my right foot. So for several days running, I would think of the energy flowing through that spot. Then one day, the blockage opened up, and a sudden memory came up of something that had happened when I was a child. We lived on a farm. I was up on the second story of a barn. I jumped into a pile of straw, and I landed on a nail hidden in the straw right at that spot in the foot. Without realizing it, I had been carrying the tension around ever since then. It was through working with the breath that I was able to let that tension go.

What this means is that how you perceive the body can either prevent you from dealing with problems of tension in the body or can help you resolve them. So try to use perceptions that are helpful. In this way, you both make it easier for the mind to find a comfortable place to be concentrated, and you also gain insight into the power of perception.

This is one of the main issues in meditation. We believe our perceptions to be real, but actually they're often quite arbitrary. So if you find a perception is useful for one purpose, use it for that purpose, but be wary about its actually creating a problem in another area. Learn how to vary your perceptions both for the purpose of gaining concentration and for the purpose of gaining insight into the workings of the mind. It's in this way that concentration practice develops both calm and insight, both of which are qualities needed for gaining awakening.

We'll now have a brief period of walking meditation. Try to find a walking path that's at least 20 paces long. Walk at a normal rate. Be aware of the breath even as you're walking. If you find it too difficult to stay with the breath, you can focus on the movement of your feet as a preliminary exercise, but the purpose of walking meditation is to get used to being with the breath even as you're moving around, so that you can carry the meditation into your daily life.

When you get to the end of the path, stop for a second to make sure that your awareness is with the body, then turn around and go back in the other direction. The image that the Buddha gives is of a man with a bowl of oil on his head with another man standing behind him with a raised sword. If a drop of oil spills, the second man is going to cut off the first man's head. So, try to be fully aware of your body. I want you all to come back here with your heads on.

Q&A

Q: Can you explain the difference between faith and devotion?

A: Faith is basically a set of assumptions that you make about what to believe and whom to believe as a basis for choosing what is best to do. We'll be talking more about this topic tonight. As for devotion, it really depends on what your faith is. If you believe that there is a being who is going to help you if you please him, then the way that you express devotion will be to try to please that being. In Buddhism, we do show some devotion to the Buddha, but it's not because we think he'll do something for us, and we don't have to please him. Devotion is simply a means of reminding ourselves of how much we respect him because the truths that he taught are very important to us. He taught four noble truths, and the word "noble" here has a special meaning. These are the most important truths to keep in mind as we conduct our lives. There are a lot of other truths in the world, but we should rank them on a lower level. For example, we know that the Sun someday will go nova and everything we do will be vaporized, which makes it sound like our actions have no meaning. But the four noble truths tell us that our actions *do* have meaning in terms of how we will experience pleasure and pain even when the world is gone. They also teach that true happiness is possible.

This is very different, say, from what advertisers teach us. They tell us, "Forget about true happiness. Focus on the happiness you can get from buying our product." We're bombarded by messages like this all the time. In Europe did they have the BMW Chill? It was a TV commercial in America where a man comes up to the top of the parking garage, he sees his BMW, and gets a frisson. So we show devotion to the Buddha to remember that the BMW Chill is worth nothing.

Q: How does one best maintain heedfulness?

A: Here's a method that the Buddha recommends: Every morning when you see the sunrise, remind yourself that you could die today. Then you ask yourself, "Is there any unfinished business in my mind, are there any unskillful qualities that would create difficulty if I had to die?" Then you focus on clearing the mind of those qualities. When the Sun sets, remind yourself that you could die in the night, and then employ the same reflection.

Now, this is not to get you depressed. It's to focus your attention on how

important today is and to make the most of today. When the Buddha talks about maintaining your focus in the present moment, it's not because the present moment is a wonderful moment, and also it's not because your present awareness is an unconditioned awareness. It's because there's work to be done in the mind and the present moment is the best time to do it.

This relates to the earlier question on devotion. We give primary importance to the four noble truths and less importance to what's coming in through our senses or to the messages coming from the media. We have to remind ourselves that the media are not concerned about our true well-being. It's up to us to look after our well-being. And we respect the Buddha because he emphasizes that point.

Conviction (1)

Tonight's talk is on the topic of conviction, which is the first of the five faculties.

The Pāli word for conviction, *saddhā*, can also mean belief or faith. When coming to Buddhism, most people don't like to hear the word "faith" because they've been burned from previous exposures to belief systems demanding faith in things that are unreasonable and that also place power in other people's hands. However, in the Buddha's teachings, conviction functions as a working hypothesis. It's a hypothesis about the power of your action. It deals with things that you haven't proven yet and that you cannot prove until you test them, but that are necessary to take on as assumptions in order to follow the path. In the Buddha's eyes, even reason is not proof of something's truth. It's simply one way of inducing faith or conviction. Proof comes from putting the teachings into practice and gaining the direct experience of true happiness as a result.

What's attractive about having conviction in the power of your actions is that there's nothing unreasonable about it, and it places power in your hands.

The Buddha teaches a path of action to put an end to suffering, so to follow that path you need to make certain assumptions about action.

- The first assumption is that actions are real and not illusory.
- Second, your actions are the result of your choices. They're not just the result of some outside force acting through you. In other words, they're not determined simply by the stars or your DNA. You're actually making the choices.
- The third principle is that actions do have effects. You're not writing in water, where everything you write immediately disappears. When you do something, it will have an effect both in the present moment and lasting through time into the future.
- The fourth principle is that the effects of your actions are tendencies. They're not strictly deterministic; they don't lead to ironclad outcomes.
- The fifth principle is that the effects of your actions are dependent on the state of your mind, one, while you're doing the action, and two, when you're receiving the results of the action.

Now, these principles are not things that you can be agnostic about. Every time you act, you're making a decision as to whether or not the action is worthwhile. And your calculation will depend on how you take a position on those first three points: in other words, that the action is real, that it is your choice, and that it does have

effects. For best results, the Buddha recommends basing your calculations on accepting all three of these principles. If you don't, there will be no reason to be careful in what you do. And he also recommends assuming that the law of kamma is 24/7. It's not like a traffic law, for instance, where no parking is allowed on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but you can park all you want on other days of the week. All too often we have the attitude that the effects of kamma should bend to our will. In other words, with some actions we tell ourselves, "I hope this action has a result," but with others we like to tell ourselves, "I hope this won't have a result. It doesn't matter." But the Buddha says that you have to take on the basic assumptions of kamma consistently if you want to follow the path consistently. In other words, skillful actions lead to good results and unskillful actions lead to unpleasant results. Always.

As for the last two assumptions—that the effects are tendencies and that those effects depend on the state of your mind, both while you're doing the action and when you receive the result: If you didn't accept these two principles, the path to the end of suffering would be impossible. Everyone would have to endure the results of past mistakes before gaining awakening, and as a result, no one would be able to get to awakening. They would be simply stuck, continually having to suffer from their past actions. Remember, when the Buddha teaches about kamma, he never talks about anyone "deserving" to suffer. If you develop your mind, as he says, in an unlimited way, then when the results of past actions come, they will have only a very small result. The image he gives is of a body of water. If you place a lump of salt into a large river of water, then—assuming that the river is clean—you can still drink the water in the river. However, if you put the same crystal of salt into a small cup of water, you won't be able to drink the water because it's too salty. One of the purposes of practicing is to create a larger, unlimited mind state. The Buddha's teachings are all about gaining release from suffering, whether that suffering is "deserved" or not.

Now in Buddhism, conviction in these principles of action has three dimensions: whom you believe, what you believe, and what you do as a result. There's a passage where the Buddha says that conviction is expressed in the four stream-entry-factors [§2]. The problem here is that Pāli is like German. You can simply state a compound, like "stream-entry-factor," and it doesn't tell the grammatical relationship among the different parts of the compound. And it turns out that there are two sets of stream-entry-factors, in which the parts of the compound relate differently to one another. The first set tells you what to do to get stream-entry, which means that they're factors for stream-entry [§3]. The second group tells what happens as a result of stream-entry. In other words, they are factors of stream-entry [§4].

Fortunately, both sets are relevant to the issue of conviction, so we'll look at both. Tonight, we'll discuss the first set, and tomorrow we'll discuss the second.

The four factors in the first set are these:

- 1) associating with people of integrity;
- 2) listening to the true Dhamma;
- 3) appropriate attention; and
- 4) practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma.

The first factor, associating with people of integrity: The Buddha speaks very highly of what he calls the value of admirable friendship. Once Ven. Ānanda went to see the Buddha and said to him, “This is half of our life of the practice, having admirable friends.” And the Buddha said, “No. It’s the whole of the practice.” Now, that doesn’t mean our admirable friends will do our practice for us, simply that, without their example, without their teaching, we would never know the path.

Admirable friendship has two aspects. The first is choosing admirable people as friends. The second is emulating their good qualities. In other words, you don’t just hang around good people. You try to be like them.

The Buddha lists four qualities for recognizing admirable friends: conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment [§5]. Admirable friends don’t only teach that actions based on these qualities are crucial for happiness, they also embody these principles in their own actions.

To recognize whether potential friends have these qualities, one, you have to spend time with them, and, two, you have to be observant. At the same time, you have to have some integrity, too, because if you don’t have any integrity yourself, you won’t be able to recognize it in other people.

For example with virtue, you know a person’s virtue by living with that person for a long time, by being observant, and by being virtuous yourself. If you want to learn about a person’s purity, you need to have dealings with them. In other words, you make trades, for example, you have projects that you work on together—or you can even engage in a debate—and in that way you begin to know whether this person is really pure or not. And again, you should be pure in your own dealings as well. As for their discernment, you learn that through listening to your potential friends, engaging them in discussion, and particularly noticing how they answer questions.

Virtue, in Buddhism, is expressed in the five precepts. Of the five, truthfulness is said to be the highest virtue because it’s only through truthfulness that you’re in a position to admit your mistakes and to learn from them. There are passages in the Canon called the Jātaka tales, which tell the stories of the Buddha in previous lifetimes. And it’s obvious from some of the stories that he’s still learning the ropes, because sometimes he breaks the precepts: Sometimes he kills, sometimes he steals, sometimes he has illicit sex, sometimes he takes alcohol. But he never lies. Ever. For him, that’s the most important precept. Because after all, if you lie to someone, the misunderstanding you create can have a bad effect not only in this lifetime but also into future lifetimes. And as the Buddha says, if you feel no shame at telling a

deliberate lie, there's no evil you're incapable of doing.

As for generosity, the Buddha says you know someone is generous by these characteristics: They give what is hard to give, and they do favors that are hard to do.

When talking about generosity, the Buddha places a lot of emphasis on the fact that it has to be freely given. Back in his time, if you asked the brahmins, "Where should a gift be given?" they would say, "To the brahmins!" King Pasenadi once came to the Buddha and asked him, "Where should a gift be given?" probably expecting the Buddha to say, "Give to the Buddhists." But what the Buddha actually said was, "Give where you feel inspired and where you feel that the gift will be well-used." And to this day, when monks are asked, "Where should we give a gift?" we're supposed to say, "Give where you feel inspired or where you feel it will be well-used." I once was asked by someone whose mother wanted to give two million dollars to a Buddhist center, "So, should she give it to your monastery or to another center?" I had to say, "Tell her to give where she feels inspired." And I saw the money fly away to the other center. But then I comforted myself that I had a virtue worth more than two million dollars.

The reason why we don't try to force gifts is because giving, when it's freely done, is your first experience of freedom of choice. This is one of the primary lessons of kamma: freedom of choice. So to reinforce that lesson, the Buddha emphasized the importance of respecting the freedom to give. That way, when there's no pressure to give and yet you want to give, you can take joy in that gift and joy in that freedom. When you take joy in that freedom, it prepares your mind to accept the higher teachings.

As for discernment, you recognize it in another person by two qualities: The person has no greed, aversion or delusion that would (1) lead him to claim knowledge that he doesn't have or that would (2) lead him to tell other people to do things that would cause their harm.

So those are some of the aspects of the first quality for stream-entry: learning how to recognize people of integrity so that you can associate with them and emulate their good qualities.

As for **the second factor**, listening to the true Dhamma: How do you know what is true Dhamma? Primarily, true Dhamma is to be known by the results that come from putting it into action. The first test is, one, that it helps you avoid harming yourself and, two, it helps you avoid harming others. Harming yourself, in the Buddha's terms, would mean breaking the precepts. Harming others would mean getting *them* to break the precepts. I think that's a very interesting point. We usually think that we harm other people by killing them or stealing from them, but the Buddha says, No, you actually harm them more if you get *them* to kill or to steal because those actions, through the principle of kamma, would lead to their long-term harm and suffering.

Another series of standards that the Buddha gives for testing the true Dhamma is whether a teaching meets with three criteria: First, it has to lead to good results for yourself. In other words, it leads you to freedom and to dispassion. Second, the means to that end are also good. The three standards for judging those means are: (1) They involve shedding pride and any thoughts of vengeance. (2) They help you develop persistence in developing skillful qualities and getting rid of unskillful ones. In other words, you don't simply accept things as they come and go. You try to shape your mind in a positive direction. Then (3), they foster contentment with the material surroundings that are conducive to the practice.

The third criterion is that the true Dhamma is to be tested by the impact your practice has on other people. This has three aspects, too. (1) You're modest in that you don't brag about your attainments. (2) You don't try to get entangled with other people. And (3) you're not burdensome to others.

So if you learn any Dhamma lesson that meets with these standards, then you know that you're listening to the true Dhamma.

The third factor for stream-entry is that once you've listened to the Dhamma, you have to pay appropriate attention to it. In other words, you come to the Dhamma asking questions about how it helps put an end to suffering. Once you've learned that lesson, you frame questions about how to apply that teaching to the way you're living your life: How can I use this teaching to help shape my life toward the end of suffering?

The Buddha describes, as a preliminary lesson in developing discernment, the questions you should bring to someone when you're listening to the Dhamma: "What is skillful? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy? What is not blameworthy? What should be cultivated? What should not be cultivated?" And then the most important question, "What, having been done by me, will be for my long-term harm and suffering, and what, having been done by me, will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?" In other words, discernment comes from seeing that happiness comes from actions, and that long-term is better than short-term. There's a passage in the Dhammapada saying that if you see a higher happiness that comes from letting go of a lower happiness, you give up the lower form of happiness for the sake of the higher happiness. A British scholar who translated that passage into English once wrote a footnote to the passage, saying, "This could not possibly be the meaning of this passage. It's too obvious." Well, it may be obvious as a general principle, but in actual practice we find it very difficult to follow. If you compare life to a chess game, everyone wants to win the game and yet keep all their pieces. Which is not very wise. From the Buddha's point of view, if you want to be wise, you have to be willing to lose some of your pieces. Only then can you win. And that's the principle of appropriate attention, too. You want to focus on solving the problem of suffering, and everything else should be secondary to that.

This ties in directly with **the fourth factor** for stream-entry, which is practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. This principle has two meanings. One is that you try to shape your life by the Dhamma and not the other way around. In other words, you don't try to change the Dhamma to fit your life or your preferences. You have to change your habits to fit in with the Dhamma.

The second meaning of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma is to practice for the sake of dispassion. Once there were some monks who were going to go to a far distant part of India, and so they asked Ven. Sāriputta, "What would be a good way to teach people who are new to the Dhamma?" And Sāriputta said, "Teach them that your teacher teaches the end of passion." That's the first principle of the Dhamma, dispassion. In fact, the Buddha says that that's the highest of all dhammas.

Now, dispassion is not a matter of aversion or apathy. It's a sense of maturing or growing up, of sobering up, because we see that the pleasure that comes from becoming is not worth the effort, and that there is a higher happiness that comes from outgrowing our attachment to our normal identities, to our normal sense of the world, and to the worlds that we inhabit through our desires.

It requires a certain maturity to see this. When Ven. Sāriputta was talking to the monks, he noted that when intelligent people hear that the Buddha teaches dispassion, they will ask, "Dispassion for what and why?" But that was people in the Buddha's time. At present, most people wouldn't be interested enough even to ask those questions. They see dispassion as something lifeless and dry. Seeing the value of dispassion takes a certain amount of conviction. We have no proof beforehand of the value of dispassion other than the example of people who have found the happiness that comes from dispassion and who are obviously not dead and dried up. On the contrary, they're exceptionally happy. As in our time: We see the example of Ajaan Mun, Ajaan Lee, Ajaan Fuang, and Ajaan Chah.

So those are the two meanings for the principle of practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma: You shape your life by the Dhamma and you fashion it for the sake of dispassion. You're not practicing meditation simply to relax or for stress reduction or to squeeze it into the life you're already living. Instead, you allow your practice to change your sense of values and to change your life, so that you live in a way that actually is conducive to true happiness.

So, these four factors for stream-entry—associating with people of integrity, listening to the true Dhamma, appropriate attention, and practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma—are the activities and values that we take on as working hypotheses in our search for awakening. These are the objects of our conviction in terms of who we believe in, what we believe, and what we do as a consequence. In other words, *who we believe in*: people of integrity who teach us that our actions do matter, that they have the potential for great good or great harm. What

we believe in, is the true Dhamma that leads us to happiness without any harm. And then *what we do*: We develop appropriate attention—in other words, we question the Dhamma, we question our lives to figure out how best to put an end to suffering—and then we practice the Dhamma in accordance with that.

Distracting Thoughts

April 24, 2017

We know that the Buddha gained awakening under the Bodhi tree. The question is: What was he doing under the tree? And the first step of what he was doing is what you're doing right now. You're trying to develop right concentration. And, like you, he found that he had to deal with distracting thoughts.

As he described the process of finding the path, the first factor of the path he realized was right concentration. He didn't attain right concentration right away, though. He simply knew that that was what he would have to do. To get there, he first had to develop right resolve, which meant developing skillful thoughts and abandoning unskillful ones.

Now, the first step in dealing with distracting thoughts is to recognize them when they come. But you don't stop there. Ajaan Suwat tells a story of when he was a young monk. He went to stay with Ajaan Mun, and he was scared to death of Ajaan Mun. But one morning he found himself alone with Ajaan Mun, who asked him, "How is your meditation going?" And Ajaan Suwat had to admit that all he was doing was dealing with distraction. Ajaan Mun replied, "Well, that counts as mindfulness practice. When you recognize a distracting thought as a distracting thought, that's part of mindfulness." Fortunately, Ajaan Suwat realized that Ajaan Mun was not saying that it's okay to stay there. He was just giving Ajaan Suwat encouragement. So Ajaan Suwat took the encouragement simply as that—and he used it to develop himself further on the path. He didn't make the mistake of thinking that it was okay to just accept distracting thoughts as distracting thoughts and not do anything about them.

So what is the next step? Once you recognize distraction, you try to cut away any causes that would give rise to more distraction. The Buddha gives five examples for how you deal with distracting thoughts. And as he says, some of these approaches were ones he himself used on the way to awakening.

The first approach is to replace an unskillful thought with a more skillful one. The skillful thoughts you try to use will depend on your state of mind and the particular distraction.

The state of the distracted mind, as the Buddha said, can fall into three sorts. The

first is when the mind has too little energy, when it's depressed, when it feels discouraged or lonely. The second sort is when you have too much energy, when the mind is excited or worried. And the third sort is simply when you're trapped in a particular thought because the thought has some attraction for you.

For the first instance, when you have too little energy, the Buddha recommends trying to gladden the mind, and there are different ways of thinking that can do this. One is to develop the sublime attitudes: thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity for all beings. You may find that those thoughts lift up the mind. Another topic can be your own generosity. Think of times when you gave a gift because you freely wanted to give it. This particular thought works well if you have lots of acts of generosity you can think back on. In other words, if you can think of only one time in your life that you were freely generous, it doesn't work as an uplifting thought for very long. This is why continuous generosity is a good basis for meditation. Another gladdening theme would be to think back on your own virtue, remembering the times when you could have done something harmful and may have gotten away with it, but you saw that it was beneath you, so you didn't do it. That gives you a sense of self-esteem. You can also think of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha: any aspect of those three things that gives you a sense of inspiration. Any of these themes can help gladden the mind.

The second problem is when the mind is too excited or worried about the future. The Buddha says you should try to steady the mind, and a good theme for that is contemplation of death. In other words, death could come at any time, which means that your worries about the future would be totally useless.

Once there was a woman who came to practice at Wat Dhammasathit with Ajaan Fuang. Her plan was to stay for two weeks, but on the second day she came to say goodbye. Ajaan Fuang asked her, "Hey, I thought you were going to stay two weeks. Why are you going back so soon?" She said, "I'm worried about my family. Who's going to cook for them? Who will wash the clothes?" And he said, "Tell yourself that you've already died. They're going to have to look after themselves some way or another." And it worked. She was able to stay for the two weeks. So if you find yourself worried about what will happen after the retreat, tell yourself you've already died, and that can help stabilize your thoughts.

Another useful contemplation to steady the mind is to tell yourself that you don't know what's going to happen in the future, but you *do* know that whatever comes up, you're going to need more mindfulness, more alertness, more discernment, and more concentration, so the best way to prepare for the future is to get the mind back to the breath and to develop those qualities in the mind right now.

As for when the mind is trapped by an attractive thought, remind yourself that there are three things that make a thought attractive. One is sensuality. The second is ill will. We may never like to admit it to ourselves, but we do find something

attractive in feeling ill will. And the third type of thinking that we can find attractive is closely related to ill will, which is the thought of doing harm. We have to counteract those thoughts by seeing their drawbacks. To counteract sensuality, think thoughts of renunciation. First you think about what it is that has you attracted to the object that you're feeling sensuality for, and to remind yourself that it also has its unattractive side. For example with the human body, you look back first on your own body. What do you have under the skin? If you took all of the parts of the body out and put them on the floor, you'd want to run away. Then remind yourself that what you have in the body is the same as what other people have in their bodies. So ask yourself, exactly which part are you attracted to? You might say the skin, but if you took the skin off and put it in a pile on the floor, again you wouldn't find it attractive. It would be disgusting.

There's a story in the Canon of a man who confronted a nun one time. She was alone in the forest and he suggested that she disrobe and come with him. Her response was, "What do you find attractive in my body?" He said, "Your eyes." And she said, "These disgusting eyeballs, all covered with mucus? Really?" And he said, "Really." So she plucked out one of her eyes and she handed it to him. Of course, he didn't accept it. He apologized profusely, and left her alone. So, think about that the next time you feel attracted to any part of a human body: Would you want it if the owner handed you just that part?

The second step in thoughts of renunciation, after contemplating the object of sensuality, is to contemplate the sensuality itself: the thoughts that view these things as attractive. We're actually more attracted to these thoughts than we are to their objects, which means that you have to see the drawbacks of the thoughts themselves. To begin with, the thoughts get the mind worked up, and second, when you become attracted to something like that, you're actually being trapped in a position of weakness. You're making your happiness depend on things that are outside of your control, and often, if you actually gain the object of your desire, other people will try to take it away from you. As the Buddha said, when you get trapped in thoughts of sensuality, it's like wearing goods borrowed from other people. The owners can come and take them away at any time. Another image he gives is of a hawk flying off with a piece of meat: Lots of crows and other hawks will attack it. In other words, when you get enmeshed in thoughts of sensuality, you're placing yourself in a weak and also a dangerous position. When you can see the sensuality in these terms, it helps to loosen its appeal.

As for thoughts of ill will, the Buddha reminds you that if you act on ill will, you're going to suffer for a long time. At the very least, when we're stuck in thoughts of anger, we tend to do and say stupid things that will give satisfaction to the people we don't like. Just thinking about that fact can help pull you out of the ill will. You see that the ill will is actually harmful to you. If you really had goodwill for yourself,

you wouldn't let yourself think those thoughts. The same principle applies to thoughts of harmfulness.

So in other words, it's okay to think while you're meditating if the way you think is actually curing an unskillful way of thinking and bringing you to the point where you want to get back to the topic of your meditation. For example with thoughts of renunciation, if you realize that thinking thoughts of sensuality is not going to be good for you, then the question is: Where will you find your pleasure? And the answer is: In concentration. This is one way in which thinking can lead the mind into concentration.

That's the first way of dealing with distracting thoughts: replacing an unskillful thought with skillful thinking.

This also leads into **the second approach**, which is to think of the drawbacks of your thinking. We've already mentioned a few of the techniques for this approach, but there are other techniques as well. For example, one that I've found very useful if my thoughts are going back to the same topic again and again: I ask myself, "If this were a movie, would I pay to watch it?" And usually the answer is, "No. The plot is horrible, the acting is even worse, so why am I spending time with it?" When you can see these thoughts as a waste of time, it's a lot easier to go past them. That's the second approach.

The third approach: If the thoughts keep coming back, you can simply ignore them and pay attention to your breath instead. Remind yourself that even though there is thinking going on in the mind, it doesn't destroy the breath. You stay with the breath and let the thoughts take care of themselves. Ajaan Lee's image is that the thoughts are like shadows. If you go running after a shadow with a bar of soap in your hand to try to clean it to make it white, you'll never succeed. You just get drawn further and further away from your breath. So just let the shadows run around on their own. If you stay still, eventually the shadows will have to be still as well.

Another image you can think of is that your thoughts are like crazy people. You have work to do, and they want to come and talk to you. Even if you say just a word to them to drive them away, they have you. So the only way you can deal with them is to pretend they're not there. They'll say things that are even crazier and crazier to get your attention, but the best way to deal with them is just not to respond at all. When you don't feed them with your attention, eventually they'll go away. That's the third approach.

The fourth approach is to notice that when the mind is thinking, there's going to be a pattern of tension somewhere in the body. If you can locate where that tension is and just breathe right through it and allow it to relax, the thought will have no place to stay. It'll have to stop. This works especially well as you get more and more sensitive to the breathing energies in the body. Think of that image of the spider on

the web. As soon as an insect touches the web, the spider moves from its spot, deals with the insect, and then returns back to its spot. In other words, as soon as you see a pattern of tension appearing in the body, you zap it with breath energy and then you return to your focal point. That's the fourth approach.

The fifth approach, if none of these other approaches work, is to press your tongue against your palate and tell yourself, "I will not think that thought." If you have a meditation word such as *buddho*, which means "awake," you can just repeat that word quickly again and again and again—rapid fire, like a machine gun—in your mind, and that will block the thought. This last approach is the one that requires the least discernment and the most force, so it doesn't work for a long time, but it is useful to have as a tool if nothing else works. It clears the mind, at least for a short period. If we think of these different approaches as if they were tools in a toolbox, the first tools are the more refined ones, like a surgeon's tools. The last tool is like a sledgehammer.

These are the ways the Buddha himself dealt with distracting thoughts. So when you see that you have a distraction, try to understand what the distraction is and why the mind is attracted to it. Is it because there's too little energy or too much energy? Or is it because there's something in the thought itself that's really attractive? Once you see what the problem is, gain a sense of which tool will work for that particular problem. It's in this way that we take inspiration from the Buddha's awakening. Remember that he was able to attain awakening on his own and we can do the same.

There's a legend from Thai history. The Burmese had invaded Thailand back in the 16th century, and so the king of Thailand, Phra Naresuan, set out to attack them. He went with his troops, all of them on elephants. They were going to do a stealth elephant attack at dawn—a concept I really like, a stealth attack on elephants. The king had the fastest elephant, so he was the first to arrive at the Burmese camp, right at sunrise. When the dust settled, he realized that he was the only Thai person there. His troops were far behind. So, how was he going to get out alive? He saw the Burmese crown prince, and so challenged him to a duel, a duel on elephant back, saying that it was a point of honor. The Burmese crown prince accepted the challenge, and the Thai king was able to kill him. Just as he finished killing the crown prince, his troops finally caught up with him and they drove the Burmese back to Burma.

Now, when the king returned to his capital, he was furious with his troops. He yelled at them, "You fools! I could have died!" So to teach them a lesson, he decided to execute some of his generals. Word of this got to one of the senior monks living outside of the capital at Ayutthaya. He sent word to the king: "I'd like to talk to you." So the king went to see the monk, and the monk said, "Do you know the story of the Buddha's awakening?" And, of course, the king said, "Yes." The monk then asked, "When he gained awakening, was there anyone around him?" And the king said,

“No. The five brethren had left him.” And so the monk said, “This is why we remember the Buddha and why his accomplishment was so impressive: because he did it on his own.” And then he added, “In the same way, your accomplishment is going to go down in history because you acted alone.” You can imagine the king’s feelings—so he went back and he forgave all the generals.

In the same way, as you’re sitting here meditating, when you overcome your unskillful thoughts, you remember that you can do this alone, too. History may not remember it, but that doesn’t matter. It matters to you.

Q&A

Q: This morning when they turned off the sound system, there was a sudden noise that startled me. How do I resolve or cure the situation?

A: There is a relationship between the levels of concentration you're in and the extent to which you'll be startled by loud noises. The tradition talks about three levels of concentration. The first level, momentary concentration, is your ordinary, everyday level of concentration when you're listening to people or reading. The second level, access concentration, is a phase the mind goes through as it's beginning to settle down. And the third level, fixed penetration, is when you're firmly settled on your object. It's in that second level that you're most easily startled by sounds. So it's normal that, as you're beginning to settle down, the noises will have more of an impact on you.

I once heard one ajaan in Thailand explain the three levels of concentration in this way: Momentary concentration cannot stand pain. As soon as it runs into the slightest bit of pain, it changes to something else. And "pain" here can mean the slightest displeasure, even just the displeasure of boredom. However, if you can learn how to stitch those moments of concentration together, you'll get to the second level, which can withstand pain but it can't withstand pleasure. As soon as it hits pleasure, it goes for the pleasure and loses its focus. The third level is the level that can withstand both pleasure and pain. Whatever comes up, it can maintain its focus. That's the level we're aiming for.

Q: I have lots of persistence and conviction. I think I also have pretty good discernment, but as for concentration, it's more difficult. I stay at what you describe as the second level. This is in spite of being assiduous. I really put a lot of effort into my daily practice. What can I do to alleviate the situation?

A: One thing you might want to look into is the question of sense restraint. In other words, as you're looking at things in the course of the day, ask yourself, "Why am I looking at this?" When you're listening to things, "Why am I listening to this?" If the motivation is neutral, then it's okay. However, if you find that you're looking or listening for the purpose of greed, lust, or anger, then you should change the way you look and listen. This applies especially to the media. We look at the TV, we look at the Internet, and it's not that they pull our minds in. We're the ones who turn

them on, looking for trouble. So, the more you can control the input you get from the senses and the reasons for going out for these things, then you'll begin to see the issues that are getting in the way of your concentration. Again, think of the mind like a committee. You have to ask yourself who's doing the looking and listening. Often they won't let you know who they are until you get in their way. Then they'll complain—and that's when you'll know who they are.

Q: What can one do when one has doubts about one's own spiritual practice even if one wants to stay on that particular path?

A: Try to look at what in your particular path encourages skillful thoughts, skillful words, and skillful deeds. If you see that they actually do give rise to more skillful thoughts, words, and deeds, that will help to alleviate some of your doubts.

Q: Should dispassion be better translated as non-attachment rather than disillusionment?

A: You have to realize that when the Buddha's talking about dispassion, he's talking about the quality that forces us to step back and look at why we like to create states of becoming. It's because we have a passion for wanting a particular thing or a particular identity that we keep on creating those things. To get rid of that drive to keep creating these things, we have to see that there really is a negative side to what we're creating. This means that we have to develop dispassion for them.

Now, dispassion is not aversion. It's more a matter of sobering up, of outgrowing your addiction to what you're creating. This also relates to the image that the Buddha likes to use, which is that we like to feed on certain pleasures. As long as you find that that pleasure is delicious, you're going to keep going for it. You're going to keep creating a becoming around it. But when you begin to see that it's something really bad to feed on, you can say, "I'm not going to feed on this anymore." You really have to lose your taste for these things. If you have any background in America, it's like when you were a child and you liked to eat Twinkies, which is a mass-produced cake with a false-cream filling. Children love it because it's very sweet. When I was a child, I would save my money to buy Twinkies. But nowadays if I think about a Twinkie, it's very disgusting. So that dispassion is the attitude you have to develop to all your feeding habits, for all the becomings that you keep creating.

The term "non-attachment" gives the image that you are simply a passive observer of your experience and that you can say, "I can live with this experience or not, it's all equal to me." But in the Buddha's analysis of the mind, we're not simply passive recipients or observers. We're out there creating things. And passion is what fuels the drive to keep creating. To overcome this drive to be creative in this way requires something stronger than just non-attachment.

Q: Buddhist masters teach us not to give any importance to our ideas or opinions. But when one is an activist or militant for a noble cause, ideas have their importance. Certain ideas, like those of Hitler, have caused a lot of horrendous suffering to millions of people. As we still live in our conventional society because we have not yet reached awakening, don't we have to combat these ideas?

A: The Buddha never said to give no importance to your ideas or opinions. After all, he taught right view, which is composed of opinions, the opinions that are helpful for awakening. As for your opinions about how the world should be run, when you want to create a better condition in the society around you, one, be sure that your opinions really are helpful, and then, two, be skillful in how you hold to them. Learn how to hold to them in areas where it really would be helpful, and to let go of them in other areas where they are not. Also, learn how to take some time out to feed your mind with some quiet time in meditation, to give it some time out from carrying its opinions around, and so that, when returning to them, it can look at them with more objectivity.

It's important to realize that views are necessary, simply that you have to learn how to hold to them in a way that doesn't cause suffering, with a sense of the right time and right place. As for your activism, think of it as generosity. You're giving this to the world, and as the Buddha said, give where you feel inspired. But he also advised that you give in a way that doesn't cause harm to yourself or to others. Remember, the goal of an ideal society is never going to be attained, so we can't use that ideal as a goal that justifies unskillful means. What we leave behind are the means by which we try to improve society. So focus on the means by which you are trying to attain your good goals, and in that way—even though the goal may be out of reach—at least you've accomplished some goodness through leaving behind a good example. If you regard your opinions as means in this way, you can then learn how to use them skillfully.

Conviction (2)

Tonight's talk continues with the issue of conviction. You may remember from last night that we talked about how in the Buddha's teaching, conviction functions as a working hypothesis as to whom to believe, what to believe, and what to do as a consequence. Last night we talked about the four factors leading to stream-entry as an expression of conviction. Tonight we'll talk about the four factors that result from stream-entry, in other words, the qualities of a person who has attained the stream that leads to nibbāna. These, too, are expressions of conviction, in that a person of that sort has confirmed his or her conviction in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. Confirmed conviction in those three things counts as the first three qualities of a stream-enterer. The fourth quality is that such a person has virtues that are appealing to the noble ones: unbroken and yet ungrasped at, leading to concentration [§4].

In the context of this list, the three dimensions of conviction are these: the people whom you believe in are the Buddha and the noble Saṅgha; what you believe in is the Dhamma; and what you do as a consequence is that your virtue becomes a natural expression, a natural part of your mind. You hold to the precepts, but you don't define yourself or take any pride around your virtue.

In another context, when the Buddha talks about conviction, the "who" and the "what"—in other words, the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha—are reduced to conviction in the Buddha's awakening: both what he awakened to and how he did it [§1].

What he awakened to is that there is a deathless happiness that can be attained through your own efforts. Now, this is something of a challenge to each of us, in the sense that he says that it is possible for you to do this, and you have to ask yourself: Do you want to live your life without trying to find that happiness for yourself? That's the challenge.

How he awakened came through his understanding of human effort that he developed by abandoning unskillful actions in his own behavior and by developing skillfulness to the ultimate degree.

There's an intimate relation in his teachings between knowing and doing. You learn about your actions, the power of your actions, by *doing* actions, by trying different things out. This is why the truths that he later taught are not just truths to

contemplate or to argue about. They're truths that carry duties telling you what to do if you want to put an end to suffering.

This is also why the Buddha gave autobiographical accounts of his awakening: to show what actions can do. Throughout his quest for awakening, he would ask himself, "I'm not gaining the results I want. What am I doing wrong? What can I change in my actions?" He was constantly experimenting like this. It was through these experiments that he finally gained his awakening. In telling us about these experiments, he was encouraging us to take an experimental attitude toward our own actions as well. We talked a little bit yesterday about what the Buddha was doing on the way to awakening in overcoming distracting thoughts in his mind. And in a very brief form, the remainder of the story is that he then put the mind into concentration, from the concentration he gained discernment, and from the discernment he gained the release of awakening.

So, tonight I'd like to focus on what he awakened to. One of his briefest expressions of his awakening is that first there was the knowledge of the regularity of the Dhamma, and after that there was the knowledge of unbinding.

What is the regularity of the Dhamma? It's the pattern of how the power of action plays itself out in the world and also in the mind. After the Buddha put his mind into solid concentration, the first question that came to him was, "Is this my only lifetime or have there been lifetimes before this?" That was a hot question in his time. It's not the case that everyone in India believed in rebirth. In fact, there was a lot of argument and controversy around the topic. So, as the Buddha said when he recounted his awakening, he began to realize that he could remember lifetimes going back many, many eons. It's interesting, what he remembered about his lives—regardless of whether he was a human being, a heavenly being, an animal, or a being in the lowest realms: what his name was, what his appearance was, what he ate, his experience of pleasure and of pain, and how he died. That's life: eat, pleasure, pain, die.

As I said, he remembered many, many thousands of eons of these lives. When explaining how long an eon is, the Buddha said to imagine that there's a yoke floating in the ocean, and there's a blind turtle living in the bottom of the ocean. Once every 100 years, it comes to the surface. The amount of time it will take the blind turtle to get his head through the yoke is one eon. It's a long time.

However, the Buddha didn't just stop at that knowledge, because that, on its own, didn't lead to the end of suffering. The next question that came to him was, "Is this just me or does it happen to other people, too? And what is the mechanism that determines rebirth?" That led to his second knowledge, in which he saw all the beings in the cosmos dying and being reborn, from the lowest levels of hell and to the highest gods in the heavens. And all their rebirths were dependent on their actions, which were influenced by their views. Here we get back to the theme I mentioned the first night: your actions are intentions, and your views are acts of

attention. These determine the levels of becoming in which you take birth.

The lessons he learned from this second knowledge are these: First, he saw the role of the mind in shaping this round of death and rebirth. We don't simply act in worlds. Our actions actually *create* these worlds. Causality is responsive to the mind. We could say that the mind plays a role as a cause in creating worlds. Your consciousness is not just a by-product of material or physical laws. It's an instigator. In particular, causality is responsive to two primary acts of the mind: intention and attention. These qualities can create a lot of havoc when they create unskillful states of becoming, but they're also the qualities that are just right for developing skills, which is why they play a role in developing the skills of the path to the end of havoc.

However, causality is not totally responsive to your desires, because the nature of causality is such that if your views are wrong, they get you to create worlds of suffering. If they're right, they get you to create worlds of relative ease. But even worlds of ease are marked by aging, illness, and death. Even the highest gods must eventually die. So mortality is built into the pattern.

This realization led to his further realization that the round is futile. It doesn't really lead to anywhere. It just goes around and around.

Another realization was that there is no one in charge. Now at first, this insight can seem very disconcerting, especially if you've grown up in a culture that assumes that there's a benevolent design in charge. But with reflection, you also realize that the Buddha's realization can be liberating because it frees you to pursue your desire for true happiness. You don't have to submit that desire to someone else's plan for you.

Here again, though, the Buddha didn't stop at this knowledge. His next question was, "Given the views and intentions that keep the process going, are there views and intentions that can put an end to the cycle?"

This is what led to the third knowledge, which is called the ending of the effluents. The effluents here are the defilements of the mind. They're called effluents because they "flow out" of the mind and flood it with suffering.

This knowledge came in two steps. The first step is expressed in terms of the four noble truths. These are the views and intentions that can cut through craving and lead you to your first experience of the deathless. The next step is the actual ending of the effluents, the things that are still left in the mind after your first experience of awakening: sensuality, becoming, and the ignorance that keeps all of this going.

With the ending of that ignorance, the Buddha gained full awakening.

If we can stop here for one moment, we see that the overall pattern of his awakening follows the same pattern we should follow as we come to meditation, too. Even though we can't remember many lifetimes of stories in our past, we still have a tendency to bring our personal stories into the meditation. That corresponds to the

Buddha's first knowledge. And notice that instead of going immediately to the present moment, he first took the larger view, in which he could see how small his narratives were in the context of the whole cosmos. Only then was he ready to come to the present moment. This is why we start the meditation with thoughts of goodwill for everyone, for all beings. In other words, think of infinity before you go to the present moment. Of course, the Buddha took his last step of focusing on the present moment farther than we normally do, but he also said that we all have the potential to do what he did as well. Throughout his telling of his story, he said that he was able to follow these steps to awakening because of qualities that he had in his mind but also qualities that we can develop, too: ardency, heedfulness, and resolution. In fact, that's why he talked about his awakening: as a template for what we can do as well. We can make the regularity of the Dhamma work for us just as he made it work for him.

So that's the regularity of the Dhamma.

Then there's unbinding. The word *unbinding* means "going out," in the way a fire goes out. The meaning of this term as the Buddha applied it to the mind comes from the way people in India at that time understood how fire worked. In their eyes, fire was sustained because it clung to its fuel; and because it was clinging to the fuel, it was actually trapped by the fuel. In English we say that something catches fire, and in India they actually took that literally, with the added point that fire was caught by the fuel because it was clinging to the fuel.

You probably know the story of the monkey in the coconut trap. There's a little hole in the coconut shell, and they put something inside the shell that the monkey wants. The hole's big enough for the monkey to slip its hand in, but once it grabs onto the object, it can't pull its fist out. You can actually catch monkeys this way. If the monkey were to let go, it would be free. But it never lets go. The same with human attachment. We're trapped because we won't let go. Similarly, in the image of the fire letting go, the fire goes out because it lets go. Then it's freed. This is the image that the Buddha uses to describe what happens to the mind in awakening. You're trapped by your own clinging. You free yourself by letting go.

Now, in many ways the state of unbinding is indescribable. However, the Buddha did talk about it enough to show that it's a worthy goal, and five aspects of unbinding stand out in his descriptions.

One, it's a state of consciousness, but it's not ordinary consciousness. It's described as consciousness without a surface. The image the Buddha gives is of a beam of light. There's a window on the east wall of a house, and a windowless wall on the west side. When the sun rises, where does the light beam enter? And where does it land? It enters by the east window and lands on the west wall. If there's no wall, it lands on the ground. If there's no ground, it lands on the water. If there's no water, it doesn't land. That's the image for an awakened awareness. It doesn't land

anywhere. This is also called an unestablished consciousness and an unrestricted awareness. That's the first aspect of unbinding. It's an unestablished consciousness that lands nowhere.

The second aspect is that it is a truth. It doesn't change, it's not fabricated, and, as a result, in the Buddha's words, it is undeceptive and it doesn't waver. This aspect of unbinding is reflected in some of the names he gives for it, such as permanence, agelessness, undecaying, deathless, and truth. When he talks about nibbāna being noble, this is what he means: It doesn't change on you.

The third aspect is that it is bliss—a really intense level of pleasure and happiness, although this bliss doesn't count as a feeling. It's a different type of bliss entirely. This aspect of unbinding is reflected in some of the other names he gives for it, such as exquisite, free from hunger, peace, security. He also calls it an island, a shelter, a harbor, refuge.

The fourth aspect of unbinding is that it's freedom. It's unbound in that it's free from attachment, free from longing, free from craving.

And then the fifth aspect is excellence. In the Buddha's words, it's amazing, astounding, the ultimate, and the beyond.

So, even though unbinding, strictly speaking, is indescribable, the Buddha mentions these five aspects—true, free, blissful, excellent, object-less consciousness—to let you know that it's a really good thing to go for. And how do we get there? By developing the five faculties, just as he did. This is what we're working on right now. This is where our practice can lead.

Think about the implications of the Buddha's awakening for a moment. We live in a world where someone has found this sort of freedom and happiness through his own efforts, and he says we can do it, too. He talks about this because he says he wants us to want this as well. So we live in a world where this is possible. Taking his story as a truth, being convinced by his story, creates a certain kind of world in which you can function for your own truest happiness.

To appreciate the impact of this vision of your self and the world, you can compare this account with other versions of the Buddha's awakening that have appeared in Buddhist traditions over the centuries. Every time that the Dhamma was changed by other traditions, they also changed the story of the Buddha's awakening. For example, there's a Mahāyāna account in the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* according to which the Buddha didn't gain awakening under the Bodhi tree. Instead, all the Buddhas of the past consecrated him by beaming their powers into his head, after which he gained awakening up in the Pure Abodes. Only then did he create an emanation body that appeared to gain awakening back on Earth. That's a Mahāyāna version. In a Vajrayāna version, recorded in the *Caṇḍamahāroṣana Tantra*, the Buddha actually gained awakening when he was back home in his palace, having tantric sex

with a consort, and all the Buddhas of the past came to give him awakening. Only after that did the Buddha go out and sit under the Bodhi tree, pretending to practice austerities to gain awakening there because he thought some people would be impressed by that kind of example.

So both of those versions create a different world, one in which nobody gains awakening on his or her own. It requires other Buddhas from the past to do it for you.

Another version of the Buddha's awakening is one we find now in what's called secular Buddhism. This version says that the Buddha had no particular awakening experience at all. He simply contemplated and studied his life, coming eventually to the conclusion that there's no one path for everyone, that we each have to be true to ourselves in deciding what way of life feels most appealing to us and gives us our greatest sense of meaning. In this version, there's no deathless truth, no real freedom at all, just the freedom to choose your own path, but none of these paths go anywhere special.

So each of these stories, depending on which one we accept, colors our sense of the world that we live in and our sense of what we have potentially within us. If we accept any of these last accounts, we live in a world in which no one has ever gained awakening on his or her own. And in the secular example, there's not even an awakening or an end to suffering.

However, if we have conviction in the Buddha's awakening through his own power, it actually gives us more confidence in our own power to shape our lives. Among the implications of the earliest account of the awakening for our lives, four points stand out.

- The first point is that there's more to us than just biological beings. We're not totally conditioned by the laws of physics and chemistry. It is possible for us to know an unconditioned happiness.

- The second point deals with the power of our actions. We have the power to create the worlds in which we live. We also have the ability to go beyond those worlds by gaining awakening, based on qualities that we have in a potential form.

- The third point is that awakening is not relative to culture. In other words, awakening is not a matter of Asian or European culture. It stands outside of culture and so can act as a measuring stick for how we measure the goals of our lives. Ask yourself: What do you want out of life when awakening is possible? Just the BMW Chill, or something more?

- The fourth point is that true happiness can be found only through developing good qualities of the heart and mind. The goal is noble, and so is the path.

So when you think of these points, you can see why conviction, defined in its traditional sense, is a strength. It empowers us to have confidence in our ability to

develop the qualities needed for true happiness. It gives us a world, it gives us a sense of who we can be in that world, that offers the hope for a genuine happiness that's more than just long-term. It lies entirely outside of space and time, and yet can be touched from within.

Now this may be a different world from the one inhabited by the people around us, and sometimes that thought can deter us, can discourage us from fully taking on conviction in the Buddha's awakening. But why should we let other people's opinions place limits on us in this way? The Buddha states that we are not just prisoners of our culture. It's in our interest to take advantage of the possibility that he has shown is open to all of us.

For example, the part of the Buddha's teachings that most Westerners find hardest to accept is the teaching on rebirth. Now, the Buddha himself said he couldn't prove it to you, however, he did say that it is a truth that we can find through our own practice. Even before we prove it for ourselves, we can see that if we adopt it as a working hypothesis, it actually makes us more skillful in our actions. You might take this as an experiment. Try to live your life for one year as if you really believed in rebirth. See what that does to your actions. You tend to get a lot more meticulous in what you do, and you tend to give more of yourself to doing good. That's the kind of proof the Buddha would offer.

So. Those are the first three qualities of confirmed conviction—in other words, conviction in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, gathered together and expressed as conviction in the Buddha's awakening.

Now, someone who has gained the first stage of awakening also has a fourth quality which is, as I mentioned earlier, virtues appealing to the noble ones. Once you've confirmed for yourself that what the Buddha taught is true, that there is a deathless happiness attained by stepping outside of space and time, you see that the process of suffering has been going on for a long, long time. It didn't start just with this last birth. And you realize that the things that have kept you from detecting this deathless were your own unskillful actions. As a result, from that point on, you would never intentionally break the five precepts ever again. However, because you see that there is no need for a sense of self in that experience of the deathless, and that it's not created by the processes of becoming, you realize that you don't need to create a sense of self around the skills you've already mastered: your virtues. As a result, you don't exalt yourself for your virtue and don't disparage other people who lack that level of virtue. In other words, you don't need to create a sense of becoming around your virtues. This is why your virtues are appealing to the noble ones. However, because you still have to develop concentration and discernment further, there will be a lingering sense of "I am" surrounding those activities, which will be abandoned only when they complete their work and yield full awakening.

To conclude, think back on the three dimensions of conviction as they apply to

this explanation of the factors of stream-entry. *Who you believe in* is the Buddha as an awakened one. *What you believe in* is the Dhamma, which teaches you that your actions do matter and that they have the potential for great happiness or for great harm—a Dhamma which, if you follow it, leads to a happiness totally free from harm, the same happiness the Buddha attained through his own actions on the night of his awakening. And then *what you do* as a consequence is that you hold to your virtues, you stick by them in a way that leads to concentration, but without defining yourself around them.

So even if you haven't yet reached stream-entry, when you think about these dimensions of conviction, they imply that you try to be as scrupulous as you can about your virtues, again without exalting yourself or disparaging others. In observing your virtues in this way, you're developing a good basis for mindfulness and concentration. That's because you're not tied up in regret or denial about having done harm in the past; otherwise, that kind of regret would actually place walls in your mind that would get in the way of your mindfulness, which is your ability to keep things in mind. The practice of virtue also helps you develop alertness—keeping close watch over your actions to make sure they're in line with the precept—and ardency—giving your whole heart to doing this well—both of which are qualities central to mindfulness practice.

So it's in this way that conviction is an important foundation not only for living a happy life but also for good, solid meditation, which will be our topic beginning tomorrow night.

Q: The fact that there have been many histories, stories about the Buddha's awakening can be somewhat disturbing. If there are three stories, then two of them are false and maybe actually all three are false, and the truth is simply something else. Is this without importance?

A: No. When you look at the three stories, there are two things you want to evaluate. Start by simply looking at the way the stories were written down and how they've been passed down. The Theravāda version came much earlier and was written down much earlier than the other ones. You can tell by the style, the language, and also the content. The Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna versions assume the Theravāda version, but the Theravāda version does not assume the other two.

But more importantly, as the Buddha said, after 500 years, the notion of there being one true Dhamma was going to die. In other words, many versions would appear, and that fact would call every version into question. That's the situation we're in now. And so you have to ask yourself, if you want to choose one version over another: What inside you prefers that version, and is that a part of you that you can trust? This requires a lot of honesty. Then ask yourself further: If you take on any of these as a working hypothesis, what effect will it have on the way you lead your life?

Which story will have the best effect? Those are the tests we have to apply to any Dhamma teaching.

Q: “The entire creation lives within you.” What does this sentence inspire in you?

A: It inspires a Yes and a No. On the one hand, yes, we do play a role in creating our experience of the world, our experience of our self, but on the other hand, no, we can’t just create anything we want. To begin with, you’re limited by the raw materials coming in from your past actions. Second, there are certain causal laws that force a particular result from a particular action. You can’t say, “I’m going to do what I want all the time and I’m going to get the results I want all the time.” Sometimes you do what you want but you don’t get the results that you want, which means that you have to learn from your actions as to what’s really skillful and what’s not—and also what’s really worth wanting and what’s not worth wanting.

Q: I’m not a Buddhist in the sense that I’ve not taken refuge and I’ve never followed any ritual. My inclination is more non-religious. Nevertheless, the Dhamma is in my heart. I don’t know how to say it otherwise. Could this become an impediment in my evolution in the practice of meditation?

A: You have to understand that taking refuge is not a ritual. There is a ritual for taking refuge, but that’s not the actual taking of refuge. What taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha means is that you want to take their example as a model for how you live your life, and you want to take their qualities and bring them into your heart. For example, the Buddha was a person of wisdom, compassion, and purity, and so you want to develop those same three qualities in your heart. When those qualities are in your heart, then you have a refuge inside, and that’s what really matters.

Pain

April 25, 2017

A problem that we all encounter in meditation is pain. It's everywhere. I must admit, it's a little bit disconcerting when I come to France and in every village I go to, there's always a big sign that says they're selling "Pain." So, it's a universal problem. We don't like pain, but we learn a lot from it. After all, the Buddha listed *dukkha*, or pain, as a noble truth. It's the very first noble truth and it's the problem we're here to solve. We can solve it not by running away from it, but by comprehending it. When we comprehend it, we can get past it. However, our initial instinct is to try to run away or to try to push it away. To overcome that instinct, we practice concentration to give the mind a good place to stay where it doesn't feel threatened by the pain. From there we can look into the pain in an objective way.

So the first step when you're dealing with pain is not to focus on the pain but to find a spot in the body that you can make comfortable through the way you breathe and relate to your breath energies. Ajaan Lee gives the analogy of a floor in a house. If you're going to lie down on the floor, don't lie down on the rotten spots. Find the spots that are solid and lie down there. He also gives another analogy: It's like eating a mango. If a mango has a rotten or a wormy spot, eat the spot where the flesh is good. Leave the rotten spot to the worms.

So, suppose that you have a pain in your knee. Focus someplace else in the body and then, when you get that spot comfortable and it feels secure, think of the good breath energy in that good spot spreading down through the knee and then out through the sole of the foot. In other words, don't allow the pain to seem like a wall that can block the breath. Think of the breath being able to penetrate anything.

Also, think of the breath as being there first. In other words, it's not that you're pushing the breath through the pain. Instead, you're backing up a little bit to remind yourself that your first experience of the body is the breath energy. The breath is actually prior to, and more fundamental than, the pain. See how that perception changes the balance of power.

What we're beginning to do here is to change our perceptions around the pain. Use a perception that makes the pain seem less solid. Then it won't have possession of the knee.

Now, when you feel secure in your comfortable spot and can start focusing on the pain, there are other ways you can question your perceptions around the pain as well. One question you can ask is, “Is the pain the same thing as the knee?” This may seem like a strange question, but you have to remember that our first encounters with pain occurred when we were infants. Even before we knew language, we had to deal with pain. Some of our unquestioned understandings about pain come from that time, so we may still have some unreasonable assumptions underlying our perception of pain even though we’re adults. The best way to uproot these assumptions is to start asking questions. And sometimes, to uproot strange assumptions, you have to ask strange questions.

Another question you can ask is, “Does the pain mean to hurt you?” You have to remember the pain has no intention at all.

Another useful question is, “Is the pain a solid thing, or does it come and go in moments?” Seeing it as moments makes it less oppressive.

Then you can ask yourself, “Are the moments of pain coming at you or are they going away?” Think of yourself as sitting in a train, facing the back of the train. Everything that comes by the window, as soon as you see it, is going away, going away. Try to apply that same perception to the moments of pain as they arise.

When seeing the pain as individual moments or points of pain, you can also begin to notice that you sometimes have the tendency to take individual pains in different parts of the body and tie them together with little lines of tension. In America, there’s a game called Connect-the-Dots, where you’re presented with a series of dots and told to draw lines connecting them to see what they represent. And we do a similar thing with our pains. We connect individual pains into larger patterns of pain.

Now, this habit of connecting things in the body is a common one, and it plays an important role in using the body. If you’re going to move your arm, you need to have a sense of which part is connected to which part so that you can move it properly. But then we take that ability and we misuse it by connecting pains into something bigger than they have to be. So if you see that happening—that a line of tension is beginning to develop between one point of pain and another point of pain—just cut right through it.

There was a science fiction story I read once in which they were developing a machine for teleportation, but it wasn’t yet quite working right. Your bones came after the rest of your body. They had a space station up on the Moon and were trying to send cats back and forth, to perfect the machine. When a cat arrived, it didn’t have its bones, so what would come pouring out of the machine would be cat ooze. They would put it in a bowl, waiting for its bones to arrive. Now it didn’t just sit there in the bowl. It would try to move out of the bowl and, even though it didn’t have bones,

it could connect different parts of its body through lines of tension to make a vague, rabbit-like shape, and then it would hop around, after which it would have to go back to rest in the bowl until its bones came. It was able to move by using tension to make connections among different parts of its body. That's how we move our bodies around, too, by seeing connections and making lines of tension between the different parts.

But while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, not moving at all, you don't really need to make the connections by drawing lines of tension in the body. You can actually picture yourself as just a bowl of you, with no need to connect pains to one another. This perception of cutting these lines is helpful not only in dealing with pain, but also with any sense of tension connecting anywhere in the body—and even with thoughts appearing in the mind. Just think of cutting right through the connections, repeatedly. And then as you're sitting here, there will be a greater sense of ease.

So these are some of the tricks of perception you can use, and as you do, you begin to realize that the perception is what makes the pain something that you suffer from. Think of pain as a potential, and that it's through your perceptions that you tend to create it into something that actually makes you suffer. If you learn how to cut the perceptions or convert them into new perceptions, your relationship to the pain will change.

The important thing here, though, is to remember that you're not trying to make the pain go away. Sometimes it will happen, as you change the perception, that the pain does disappear. But sometimes the pain will stay no matter what your perception. Still, if you change the perception in a skillful way, then the pain doesn't have to make the mind suffer.

So try to explore your perceptions around the pain, so that instead of just sitting there, being a target for the pain, you're more aggressive, more proactive in searching out the pain. And as you become more proactive, you become a moving target that the pain can't hit so easily.

Now, don't forget that you need to come from a position of security. So try to keep in touch all the time with the part of the body that you can make comfortable, because that will give you the strength you need to examine the pain. And in that way, instead of trying to run away from the pain, you can actually comprehend it. You understand its relationship to perception. You learn that pain is something you don't have to be afraid of. And this, of course, will be a very useful skill to develop as you go through life, because as you get older, as you get sick, and as you approach death, pain will come whether you're sitting in meditation or not, but you'll now have the skills to deal with it without fear. And when there's no fear, the pain can't make you do unskillful things.

Q&A

Q: Can you experience a “pure” sensation without perception or “pure” feeling without perception? Is it an unperceived or non-perception of the feeling?

A: You can consciously try not to perceive the feeling but then you will be relying on the perception of something else in order to do that. The only totally pure feelings are those that are felt by awakened people.

Q: You’ve spoken about the reduction of stress. What do you have to say about Centers for Mindfulness? Some of those among us have come here on the advice of the Association for Development of Mindfulness.

A: The answer to this question requires addressing two points.

1) One is using the word “stress” to define *dukkha*: There are three reasons why I use that word. The first one came from a reporter I knew in Bangkok who asked me, “Why do Buddhists talk about suffering all the time? I don’t have any suffering in my life.”

I asked him, “Do you have any stress?”

“Oh, yes, lots!”

“That’s what we’re talking about.”

The second reason is that when you get into subtle levels of concentration, there is still some *dukkha* left, but it’s too subtle to be called suffering, so “stress” is a better word for it. Otherwise, when you’re in a state of concentration like that, you say, “I don’t see any *dukkha* here.”

The third reason is that it’s very difficult to romanticize stress. There are no songs or poems or great novels about stress. Sometimes I hear people talk about their heroic suffering, but imagine heroic stress. The two terms don’t go together. So it helps to de-romanticize *dukkha* to call it stress. That’s the issue of stress.

2) Second, reduction of stress: Anything that’s good for cutting down the amount of stress in people’s lives is a good thing, but you have to realize that what’s being taught at mindfulness centers is not Buddhist, for two main reasons. One, the purpose of the Dhamma is not simply to reduce stress, but to put an end to it. And second, what they describe as mindfulness is not what the Buddha meant by the word *sati*. What they’re teaching is patience and equanimity, which is perfectly fine,

but as the Buddha said, those qualities are only one strategy for putting an end to stress. There are lots of causes of stress that patience and equanimity cannot touch. We'll be talking about that tonight.

Q: For permanent pains, do you deal with them as you would with those that arise and disappear as in meditation?

A: To deal with them, Yes. Then again, however, remember that the purpose of the skills we learn in meditation is not to cure the pain but to change your relationship to it. In fact, it's through changing your relationship to the pain that you advance on the path. You understand the power of perception to create a good or a bad experience in the present moment, and it's in understanding that power that you gain discernment.

Q: Do you use the same method to treat physical pains and emotional knots?

A: In general terms, Yes. You need a place in your awareness to step back and then, from that position, to look at the emotional knot from the outside. And you will also have to question it because—as with physical pain—what makes an emotional knot so intense, what makes it a source of suffering, is the way you perceive it. The Buddha talks about emotional states as being fabricated out of three things: what he calls bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, and then mental fabrication.

Bodily fabrication is the way you breathe. Simply by learning how to breathe calmly around the emotional problem, you can begin to take it apart. Just two weeks ago, I was reading that some scientists had done a study showing that calm breathing calms the mind. How do you say “Duh!” in French? *Mais bien sûr*. Of course it calms the mind. We've been doing that for 2,500 years.

The more difficult parts are the verbal fabrication and the mental fabrication. Verbal fabrication is basically how you talk to yourself about the issue, which the texts divide into two activities: directed thought, where you think *of* a topic; and evaluation, where you think *about* the topic: making comments on it, asking questions about it. Mental fabrication has to do with feeling-tones and perceptions. These are the things that keep the knot tied. So you have to learn how to question them. Two questions you might start with are, one, ask them: Is this really true? And two, what if the opposite were true? These questions help to open your imagination, and that can help to untie some of the knots.

This kind of questioning will go through many levels until you finally get to the underlying perception that holds the knot together or keeps it tied together. Usually that perception comes from what's called your lizard brain. That kind of perception can appear and disappear very quickly, and yet leave its mark. This is one of the

reasons why we try to develop alertness in the meditation: so that we can see these things quickly. They're like subliminal messages. Those are illegal in France, right? They're supposed to be illegal in America, too, but they're there, and nobody detects them except people who meditate. Once I was visiting a friend, and one evening there was a TV program on Fox called *24 Hours*. Did they have that in France? It was about police trying to track down terrorists and prevent a terrorist attack. My friend wanted to see how a monk would react to this program. Well, this monk watched it for two minutes, and then went to the other side of the room. I didn't want that stuff in my brain. Then they had a commercial break for the evening news. Now, Fox is a very right-wing network. There was a big white panel behind the newscasters, and while they were talking, a message flashed very quickly across the panel, "Be afraid, be afraid, be afraid." My friend didn't see it, but I'm sure it left an effect. Your lizard brain acts in the same way. So if you're alert enough, you begin to see the messages that lie behind your emotional knots. That allows you to question those perceptions, so that you can free yourself from the knot.

Persistence

For the past two nights we've been talking about the way our acts of attention and our views shape our sense of the world and our sense of self: what the Buddha calls "becoming." Tonight we'll begin focusing on the other main factor that shapes our becomings, i.e., intention, which lies at the essence of action. Altogether, there are three faculties focused on intention: persistence, mindfulness, and concentration. We'll start with persistence.

Persistence is intimately connected with conviction. Once you are genuinely convinced of the power of your actions, you will make every effort to be heedful in doing only what's skillful and avoiding what's unskillful. The connection between conviction and persistence is shown in the third dimension of conviction, which is what you do, based on what you believe and whom you believe in. That third dimension already requires some persistence and some effort. Also, as we engage in this third dimension of conviction, we're already developing some qualities that are useful for persistence in training the mind: in particular, mindfulness, ardency, and alertness. Conviction is also related to persistence through one of the dimensions of persistence as the Buddha explains it: motivation. Conviction gives us motivation to engage in right effort, particularly in training our minds. After all, our actions come out of the mind. So, if we want our actions to be good, the mind needs to be trained. That thought underlies all your motivation for the practice.

Persistence is also intimately connected with the other two intention faculties, which are mindfulness and concentration. In fact, it's the kernel around which mindfulness and concentration grow. When you're practicing mindfulness, persistence turns into the factor of ardency. Then the ways of establishing mindfulness turn into the themes for right concentration [§7]. After all, you have to be mindful in order to stick with the object of your concentration. Concentration then strengthens your mindfulness—in fact, it's at the fourth level of absorption, or jhāna, that mindfulness becomes pure; and mindfulness, in turn, gives direction to your persistence in reminding it what to do with different issues as they come up. So all three "intention" faculties support one another.

It's important to remember these connections among persistence, mindfulness, and concentration. All too often they are forgotten, leading to many different misunderstandings about what mindfulness and concentration are.

Here's the Buddha's definition of the faculty of persistence:

“There's the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, keeps his persistence aroused for abandoning unskillful mental qualities and taking on skillful mental qualities. He is steadfast, solid in his effort, not shirking his duties with regard to skillful mental qualities. He generates desire, endeavors, arouses persistence, upholds and exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen... for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen... for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen... (and) for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, and culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen.” [S1]

Notice that this is not brute effort. It's effort that involves discernment. There are four dimensions to persistence—three of them are explicit in the above quotation, one is implicit—and all four are informed by discernment. The explicit dimensions are these: the distinction between skillful and unskillful qualities, the motivation used to generate desire, and then the type of effort you engage in. The implicit dimension concerns the amount of effort, in other words, how much effort is just right.

Let's go through these four dimensions.

First, the distinction between skillful and unskillful qualities: The word “quality” here primarily means quality of mind, but can also mean any event or action that can come from skillful or unskillful mental qualities or that can develop them in your mind. It's important to note that the Buddha never describes the mind as innately good or innately bad. It has potentials in both directions. In fact, in one passage he says that the mind is capable of anything. Or as Ajaan Lee says, the mind is neither good nor bad, but it's what knows good and knows bad, can do both what is good and what is bad, and it can also let go of what's good and what's bad. Given that we have so many good and bad qualities in the mind, the issue then is how to make the best use of both. It's like being a good cook. Normally, you like to have good ingredients to make good food, but if you're a really good cook, you can take even bad ingredients and make good food out of them.

I'll tell you a story. I have a student who is now a monk but, before ordaining, was a cook in Singapore. First he worked in the Meridien Hotel, at Le Restaurant de France, and there he learned French cooking. Eventually, he left the job, came to study at my monastery in Thailand, and decided that he wanted to ordain. So he went back to Singapore to earn some money to set up a fund for his parents. He got a job at the British Club and as he tried to show off his French cooking skills there, the other cooks said, “Don't show off, okay? Remember, we're cooking for British

people. They don't really care about good cooking."

However, one night they had a fixed-price dinner, and one of the dishes was an asparagus soup. As it turned out, they hadn't prepared enough asparagus soup for all of the people who came. So my student told all of the other cooks, "Okay, everybody out of the kitchen!" He then went to the garbage bin and found all of the scraps from the asparagus that had been shaved, he made a nice *sauce béchamel* as a base for the soup, and then he combined them to make more asparagus soup. Everyone commented that it was the best asparagus soup that night. So if you're a really good cook, you can take anything and make it good food. And you want to bring this same attitude into your meditation to deal both with skillful qualities and with your unskillful qualities. You want to make good use of whatever comes up in the mind.

What is the distinction between skillful and unskillful? Skillful is harmless and blameless. Unskillful is the opposite, anything harmful and blameworthy. The Buddha gives a list of things that are unskillful: killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, idle chatter, inordinate greed, ill will, and wrong view, particularly, not believing in the power of your actions. Now the roots of these unskillful things are greed, aversion, and delusion. Generally, as we practice, we will be doing everything we can to uproot these things, but sometimes we need to use one unskillful quality to uproot another unskillful quality. For example, remember the story of the monk and the king, where the monk used the king's pride to overcome his anger. So keep that in mind as you're working with your own mind, as a way of expanding your repertoire.

That's the first dimension of persistence: knowing what's skillful and what's not, and how to make skillful use of whatever comes up.

The second dimension is motivation, i.e., generating desire. As the Buddha said, desire is the root of all phenomena, including the path to the end of suffering. You have to *want* for the path to develop in order for it to happen.

There's an American philosopher, William James, who made a distinction between two kinds of truths. The first can be called truths of the observer, i.e., truths that are true regardless of whether you want them to be true. In fact, if you want things to be a certain way, you will miss their truth. For example, you probably remember, from studying the history of science in school, that there was a period when scientists tried to prove that the orbits of all the planets were perfect circles, because they thought that should be a sign of God's perfection. As it turns out, though, that's not the case: The orbits are ellipses, and not even perfect ellipses at that. It was because the scientists' desire got in the way that for a long time they couldn't see what was actually happening. Those are truths of the observer.

But then there are truths of the will, i.e., truths that become true only if you want them to. For instance, if you're going to be a good cook, you have to want to be a

good cook. If you want to learn to be a good pianist, you have to want it. If you're going to develop the path to the end of suffering, you have to want it. In this case, desire, if it's properly focused, is a good thing. It's what makes the truth true.

There are some passages in the Canon saying that when you work on the preliminaries of the path, there's no need to formulate the wish that the higher factors will develop. They'll develop on their own from the more basic factors. However, even in cases like that, you still need desire to persevere with the basics long enough and steadily enough for them to bear fruit. Only then will they give rise to the higher factors. It's like watering a tree. If you water the tree, there's no need to want for the tree to grow—it'll grow on its own—but you still need the desire to keep watering it. So, to nourish the path, you need skillful motivation, the kind of motivation that helps you to enjoy the efforts you're making. If you simply just push, push, push without enjoying the effort, the desire dries up and your efforts wither away. So you have to make yourself want to stick with the path.

The Buddha recommends many different ways of motivating yourself in the practice. Number one is heedfulness, which he said is the root of all skillful qualities. If you see that dangers come from unskillful actions, then you will do your best to avoid those actions.

Other qualities then can build on heedfulness. One is compassion. You see that if you practice the path, it'll lead to happiness for yourself and for other people. You'll suffer less from your own defilements, and fewer of your defilements will go prowling around, disturbing the neighbors.

Another useful quality is having a sense of humor around your defilements. There are many people who say they don't see any humor in the suttas of the Pāli Canon. Actually, they're looking in the wrong place, because the humor is primarily in the Vinaya, which deals with monks' rules. For every rule, there's a story, and the story, many times, will be humorous. And it's interesting that it has this function. For one thing, if you can laugh at the behavior that led the Buddha to formulate the rule, it helps you step back from that kind of behavior yourself. Also, if you realize that the rules come from someone with a good sense of humor, it's a lot easier to accept them.

For example, the story goes that the monks used to give a regular instruction to the nuns once every two weeks. There would be a rotating roster of monks, and one time it came to be the turn of a monk named Ven. Cūḷapanthaka. When the nuns heard that it was his turn, they said to one another, "This is not going to be an effective talk. He's just going to repeat the same passage over and over and over again." So they went to pay respect to him, and after the initial formalities, he said, "Okay, here is today's instruction." And he repeated the same passage over and over again. The nuns turned to one another and said, "Didn't we say so? This is not going to be effective. He's just going to repeat the same passage over and over and over

again.”

Ven. Cūḷapanthaka overheard what they were saying, and it so happened that he had some psychic powers. He levitated up in the air, divided himself into many images—some of the images emitting smoke, some of them emitting fire, some of them emitting water, and each repeating that same passage again and again, along with many other passages from the Buddha. The nuns said, “Wow! This is the most effective Dhamma talk we’ve ever seen!”

Well, he got carried away and so he kept up the show until after dark. Then he came back down and said, “Okay, that’s enough for tonight.” So the nuns had to go back to their monastery. Their monastery compound was in the city, but in those days, the city would close its gates every night when darkness fell, for safety’s sake. So the nuns all had to sleep outside the gate. The next morning, when the gates were opened, they filed into the city, and all the people said, “Here come the nuns from spending the night with the monks.” This is why there’s a rule that the monks cannot teach the nuns after dark.

That gives you an example of the humor in the Canon. It’s amusing, but it also serves a serious function. It helps you to accept the rule because you see, one, that the behavior really was stupid and, two, that the people who created these rules did have a sense of humor, which shows that they had a good sense of human nature. That makes it easier to live by the rules.

I myself noticed when I went to Thailand and studied with the ajaans, they all had a good sense of humor, and it was an important part of their wisdom. When you can laugh at your defilements, it’s easier to pull back from them.

So humor is a useful way to motivate yourself to practice, to abandon things that might otherwise be hard to give up.

Other qualities that the Buddha recommends for motivation include healthy pride and even conceit—in other words, the conceit you feel when you tell yourself, “Other people can do this. They’re human beings, I’m a human being, why can’t I?” That’s actually conceit but it’s conceit in a useful form. It’s like the good cook who can make good food out of garbage scraps.

Another way of motivating yourself on the path is through a sense of honor and shame. Healthy shame means basically seeing that some sorts of behavior are beneath you, and so you wouldn’t want to stoop to doing them. This is the shame that comes from a sense of honor, of high self-esteem, not from a low self-esteem.

There’s even one passage where the Buddha recommends spite as motivation. In other words, you have an enemy and you’re angry at him. But then you remember that when you’re angry, you tend to do stupid things, self-destructive things, and it gives gratification to your enemy to see you do something stupid and self-destructive. So, do you want to please your enemy? Here you’re using an unskillful

quality to get rid of an unskillful quality.

Finally, the Buddha recommends taking inspiration from the example of people in the past, such as the Buddha himself and the great teachers. The fact that they faced hardships with endurance and wisdom inspires you to do the same.

So these are all different ways of motivating yourself. As the Buddha said, when you see that you become more and more skillful, take joy in that fact, and that joy gives energy to your practice. That's the second dimension of persistence.

The third dimension concerns the *type* of effort. The Buddha lists four types of effort altogether: to prevent unskillful qualities from arising; to abandon any unskillful qualities that have arisen; to give rise to skillful qualities; and then, when they're there, to develop them all the way to their culmination.

I'll give you an example from meditation. At the beginning of the meditation, you make up your mind that you're not going to give in to distraction: That's preventing. You spread thoughts of goodwill, you reflect on aging, illness, and death, you think about the teachings on kamma, you think about the need to train your mind, and you make up your mind to stay with the breath: That's giving rise to skillful qualities. While you're meditating, when something comes up that's not related to your meditation object, you try to drop it as quickly as you can: That's abandoning. Then you focus on your object, you work with the breath to make it more comfortable so that you actually like staying there, and you get more and more interested in the effect of the breath on the body and the mind: That's maintaining and developing.

These four types of effort apply not only to meditation, but also to daily life. For example with preventing, which is something that's often overlooked in the practice: We keep thinking that as we practice, we have to stay with the present moment all the time without thinking about the future, but actually there are times when you do have to think about the future because you need to prepare for dangers that may come up. So, for example, at the end of your daily meditation, think about what's going to happen that day—say, when you go to work or there's some problem that you anticipate in the family—and use the fact that your mind is now centered and calm to think about any difficulties that you might expect in the course of the day, and to figure out how to avoid doing something unskillful.

When I was living with my teacher Ajaan Fuang, my duty was to clean his hut every evening at the end of the day. If I had any questions for him, that was the time to talk to him. And I found out that when I began to discuss an issue with him, if the way I brought up the topic seemed to be the slightest bit disrespectful or that hinted that I wanted him to solve my problems for me without my making any effort on my part, there was no discussing that topic. He would cut me off, and there would be no discussion that evening. That meant that every evening as I went to his hut, I had to think over and over in my mind, "What's the best way to approach this topic?" I got

better and better at it over time. Then I found out afterwards, as I was dealing with other senior monks in Thailand, that it was a lot easier to get what I wanted from them in a way that made them happy to help, just because I had developed the habit of thinking first about how best to broach the topic with them. So think about that. You can use your meditation in this way. It's a very helpful way to use it in daily life.

Finally, **the fourth dimension** of right effort or perseverance is the *amount* of effort: How much is just right? The answer depends on two things: first, your own level of energy; and second, the nature of the task that you're facing.

Concerning the first issue, your level of energy: You probably know the story of the monk and the lute. There was a monk who was very delicately brought up—in fact, so delicately brought up that he had hair on the soles of his feet. There's a very long story about this. Before the monk had ordained, when he was still a young man living at home, the king wanted to see his feet: "This is so strange. I want to see this." So the young man got an invitation to see the king. The parents learned of the invitation and they said, "There's only one reason he wants to see you. It's the hair on your feet." So they told him, "When you go to see the king, don't put your feet out in front of you, because that would be disrespectful. Sit cross-legged with your feet on top of your lap, and the king will see the soles of your feet at a glance."

Eventually, the young man becomes a monk and does walking meditation. He gets to the point where he's doing so much walking meditation that his tender feet start to bleed, so he starts getting discouraged. "Now, I could actually disrobe," he says, "and then I could still make merit." And just at that moment, the Buddha knows what's going on in his mind, so he appears immediately in front of him. Now, how would you feel? You're having a bad meditation and you're thinking, "I'm going to give up," and the Buddha appears in front of you.

At any rate, the Buddha asks the monk, "Were you thinking of giving up?" And the monk says, "Yes."

And so the Buddha says, "When you were a lay person, you were skilled at playing the lute, right?"

"Yes."

"When the strings were too loose, did it sound right?"

"No."

"When they were too tight, did it sound right then?"

"No."

"So, what do you do? You tune one of the strings so that it's just right"—apparently the lute in those days had five strings—"and then you tune the other four strings to that first string, and then you can pick up the theme of your song. In the same way, tune your persistence so that it's just right. Then tune the other faculties

to that one, and then you pick up the theme of your meditation.”

What this means is that you gauge how much energy you have, and then you tune your expectations to that. For example, when you come home from a long day of work, that’s not the time to sit down and say, “I will not get up until I’ve achieved full awakening!” You tell yourself, “I’m going to get through the hour. That’ll be enough.” But it also means that other times, when you have more energy, you should push yourself. That’s the first aspect of the right amount of effort: your level of energy.

The second aspect depends on the task at hand. As the Buddha said, some causes of suffering go away when you simply look at them. This is why the practice of what’s called mindfulness here in the West, *la pleine conscience* in French, will sometimes work with some causes of suffering, because all you have to do is gaze steadily at those defilements and they’ll wither away.

However, there are other causes of suffering in the mind that don’t go away so easily. You might say that when you look at them, they just stare right back at you. So, in the Buddha’s terms, you have to exert a fabrication. This refers to the three kinds of fabrication we talked about this afternoon: *bodily*, which is the breath; *verbal*, which is how you talk to yourself about the issue—this is when your views about yourself and the world become important; and then finally *mental* fabrication, which is perception and feeling.

These fabrications make up your emotions and mind states, so if an unskillful mind state comes up, try to deconstruct it in these terms, and then use the same three terms to fabricate a better mind state in its place.

For example, suppose you have a feeling of anger. If you want to get rid of the anger, first you have to change the way you breathe, so that you can calm the body. The next step is to talk to yourself about the anger. You ask yourself, “Is that person really all that bad? Doesn’t he have something good about him?” And if you see that there is something good about him, that helps to lessen the anger. If you say, “No, there’s nothing good about this bastard at all”—in other words, you’re really, really angry—then you have to remind yourself that if this person really has nothing good at all, you have to feel sorry for him because he’s creating a lot of bad kamma for himself. In other words, you learn how to talk to yourself about the issue in a way that calms you down. That’s verbal fabrication.

Then with mental fabrication, you have to look at the perception lying behind the anger. Sometimes, when you think about passing judgment on someone else, you have an underlying image of yourself sitting up here on a judge’s seat, and what happens to that little person down there below you doesn’t really concern you. It will have no effect on you. In other words, you see that your act of judgment is something that will not cause you any trouble. But the Buddha says to hold a different

perception in mind. Have a perception of yourself going through the desert, hot, tired, trembling with thirst. You see the footprint of a cow with a little bit of water in it. You realize that if you tried to scoop it up, it would get muddy. So, what are you going to do? You have to get down on all fours and slurp up the water from the ground.

Now, you wouldn't want anyone to come along and take a picture of you at that point—it would look so undignified—but you're doing what you have to do for your own survival.

In the same way, the Buddha says that when you're angry at someone else, you need to look for that person's goodness for the survival of your own goodness, even if you feel that it's beneath your dignity. You have to remember that you really need other people's goodness, because if you can't see any goodness in other people, you're going to make it very difficult to give rise to goodness in yourself. This means you have to be very careful about how you pass judgment, for the way you pass judgment can boomerang back at you. Remember there's goodness out there someplace. Hold that perception in mind. It helps to control your anger.

Now, sometimes the effort that will be required to overcome an unskillful state will be gentle. Other times it's going to require a lot of effort. As the Buddha said, if you're practicing meditation and you're miserable to the point where tears are coming down your face, you remind yourself, "Okay, this suffering is nothing compared to the suffering that I'm learning to avoid." And in the end, you'll be glad that you stuck with it. Remember that this practice affects the state of your mind not only now, but also on into the future. And who will provide for your future if you don't? No one else can do this work for you. If you don't do it now, it's not going to get easier as you get older. So when you do things right—for example, you have an unskillful desire and you fight against it all night and you finally get past it—the next morning, when you wake up, notice how good you feel that you didn't give in. Remember that sense of joy. It'll make it easier the next time. That'll give you more motivation to help you the next time around.

So those are the four ways in which discernment gets involved in skillful persistence: making distinctions between skillful and unskillful qualities—and skillful and unskillful strategies for dealing with both; discerning how best to motivate yourself; discerning what type of effort is appropriate; and discerning how much effort is just right. When your discernment guides your persistence in these ways, the effort of the practice, instead of wearing you out, becomes more and more energizing, more and more productive, strengthening all the other faculties so that they really become faculties: In other words, they take charge of your mind. And when they're in charge, you'll find that they're genuinely on your side, bringing you a happiness that you would otherwise never know.

Q: After decades of practice, what resources in yourself do you call on to maintain or, better yet, increase your sincerity, honesty, and determination in your daily life and your practice? Is habit, according to you, a strength?

A: Habit, in and of itself, is part of a strength. You have to learn how to maintain a regular schedule for the practice. But the motivation is something you have to keep stirring up for yourself: thinking thoughts of heedfulness, and realizing that this is your true well-being that you're working on. If you don't look after it, who will? I also like to think of the image of your actions as being like luggage that you carry with you. In the Buddha's image, your bad actions are like a cart that crushes and erases the footprints of the ox that pulls the cart, whereas your good actions are like a shadow that follows behind you. Your shadow has no weight, but the cart is very heavy. So if you think of your actions as luggage you're carrying, then when you want to open the luggage, what would you like to see inside? All your dirty laundry? Random junk? Think of your actions as being your most important possessions. This is the best inducement to keep the sincerity of your practice focused on what you're doing today. Remind yourself that you have today, you have this lifetime, you know you have this chance to practice, but you don't know when you're going to have the next opportunity, so you have to practice now.

Ajaan Lee's Teachings

April 26, 2107

It was 56 years ago today that Ajaan Lee passed away, so this morning—in memory of him—I'd like to discuss a few points about his teachings that are distinctive, and in particular, those that are relevant to the practice we're doing right now.

The first point has to do with his treatment of the breath. To begin with, it's distinctive that he taught that we can play with the breath, to try different kinds of breathing as a way of providing the mind a good place to settle down. Before I had encountered his teachings, I had always been told that you don't adjust the breath. Just leave it as it is and then don't do anything to it at all. I found it very boring and had difficulty staying with the breath as a result. Then when I encountered his teaching that you could adjust the breath, it felt liberating—especially when it relates to **the second point**, which is that we're not just watching the in-and-out breath, but we're also looking at the breath energies in the body. At first, I found the concept of breath energies strange but intriguing. As a child, I had always had trouble staying in contact with my body. I was always bumping into things, and so now I saw this as a good way of getting back in touch with my body—and also of dealing with various ailments in the body.

It's interesting to know how Ajaan Lee arrived at this technique. In the late 1940's, he had gone to India and had noticed all of the yogis who could sleep on beds of nails or stand on one leg all day. So he asked himself, how did they do that? His way of answering that question was not to go ask them but to sit in meditation and to pose the question in his mind. The answer he came up with was that they were playing with the breath energies in the body. So he decided to give it a try himself, not for the purpose of sleeping on beds of nails, but to see if it could help with concentration and also to deal with his own personal ailments. After he returned to Thailand, he wrote down what he had learned in what is now *Keeping the Breath in Mind, Method 1*.

A few years later, he went off to spend the Rains retreat in a part of the jungle in northern Thailand, a place that required three days just to walk there. Soon after he arrived, he had a heart attack. There were no doctors around, no medicine, nothing.

So what was he going to do? He decided to use the breath energies. You'll notice, if you look at *Method 1*, that most of the breath energies he was dealing with there were in the head. With *Method 2*, he was more interested in energies in the body. Because he was dealing with a heart ailment, he started with the energy in the back of the neck. If you've ever had a heart problem, you'll know that there's a lot of tightness in that part of the body.

From there, Ajaan Lee expanded his research into the breath energies to the point where he was dealing with the entire body. And it worked: His heart condition improved, and at the end of the Rains retreat he was able to walk out of the jungle. Then he wrote down *Method 2*, and that's what he taught for the rest of his life.

When I say that he wrote these things down, he didn't actually take a pen in hand. He would get into meditation and dictate the book, and then someone else would write down what he was saying. I once talked to the person who actually wrote down *Method 2*, and he said the problem with taking dictation from Ajaan Lee was that he spoke very fast. So this person would just make a sketch and then read back to Ajaan Lee what he had, and then Ajaan Lee would make corrections.

Those are the first two aspects of his teaching that are really distinctive and that I found particularly attractive: Breath isn't just the air coming in and out of the lungs; it's a matter of the energies in the body, and you can play with those energies to make the meditation interesting and the body a good place to stay. In fact, one of the themes that we find running throughout all of Ajaan Lee's teachings is that when you try to get the mind to settle down, you don't just force it to be still. You have to use your discernment to figure out how to make it *want* to settle down. This relates to the topic of motivation that we discussed last night.

The third point that was really special about Ajaan Lee's teachings was how he treated the topic of mindfulness. We use the word *sati* when we're translating "mindfulness" into French because by and large there's a lot of misunderstanding about what mindfulness is. As Ajaan Lee translated the word *sati* into Thai, he actually followed the old meaning in the Pāli Canon, which is that mindfulness is a function of your memory: the act of holding something in mind. In Thai, he used the word *ralyk*, which means thinking back on something or bringing it to mind.

When Ajaan Lee wrote a book on the topic of mindfulness, he placed a lot of emphasis on the three qualities that are brought to bear on mindfulness practice. The first is mindfulness itself. The second is alertness, which means noticing what you're doing in the present moment and the results you're getting. The third quality is ardency, which is basically putting your whole heart into trying to do this well. These qualities are listed in the Buddha's standard formula for establishing mindfulness, and Ajaan Lee insisted that all three qualities need to be brought together when you're dealing with issues in the body, with feelings, with the mind, or with mental qualities. To understand these frames of reference and the process of

establishing mindfulness, you have to make the most of all three of these qualities.

What's also interesting about his treatment of these three qualities, is that the one he identified with discernment is ardency—the wisdom lying in realizing that the Buddha's teachings are not there just to look at or to read or to think about, but to put into practice, and that the practice is what develops your wisdom. It's in learning how to figure out how to solve a problem that you develop your discernment.

My teacher Ajaan Fuang, who was Ajaan Lee's closest disciple, boiled these three qualities into two words that he kept emphasizing in his instructions: one, be observant, and two, use your ingenuity. In other words, try to be careful in noticing what's actually going on, what you're doing, detect where the problems are, and then try to figure out on your own how you might solve those problems. Those two activities of being observant and using your ingenuity are mindfulness, alertness, and ardency in action.

I'll give you an example. When I was first staying with him, I was a typical Westerner. I would say, "Wouldn't it be better if we did it this way or did it that way?" And so he told me, "Look, you're a Westerner. Your opinions are not wanted here." So I said to myself, "Okay, I'll just do what I'm told." And then sometimes he would ask me, "Can't you think for yourself?"

He began to realize that I was having trouble trying to figure out which instruction to follow at which time, so one night he took pity on me and told me a story about his time with Ajaan Lee. They were building an ordination hall in Ajaan Lee's monastery and, as with all the ordination halls in Thailand, they assumed that the Buddha image would be on the west side of the hall and facing east, because of the belief that the Buddha was facing east on the night of his awakening. So they placed the cornerstone—a big concrete box, in which they put auspicious things like relics and Buddha images—under where they thought the Buddha image would be near the west wall of the hall.

But when they actually moved the Buddha image into the hall, Ajaan Lee changed his mind. He said, "Let's put it on the east side facing west." And even to this day, people ask why Ajaan Lee changed his mind. Ajaan Fuang said it's because Ajaan Lee saw that Buddhism was coming West—and it so happened that that was the hall in which I was ordained.

At any rate, this meant that the original concrete box was now not under the Buddha image. It was under a part of the floor that everybody could walk over, which you don't do in Thailand. You don't walk over sacred objects.

Someone brought this to Ajaan Lee's attention one night, so he turned to Ajaan Fuang and said, "Move that tomorrow." Ajaan Fuang thought to himself, "There's no way we can move it." It was buried deep in the ground. But he knew that if he said

that to Ajaan Lee, Ajaan Lee would say, “If you don’t have faith in me, I’ll find someone else who does.” So the next day, Ajaan Fuang got all the able-bodied monks and novices in the monastery down beneath the ordination hall. They tied ropes around the concrete box, they tried crowbars to move it, they worked all day long, but the box didn’t budge.

So that evening Ajaan Fuang went to see Ajaan Lee, and said, “How about if we do it in a different way? Can we make a new box under the Buddha image, break open the old box, and then move all the objects from the old box to the new box?” And Ajaan Lee, who was chewing betel-nut at the time, simply shook his head, “Yes.”

So that solved the problem.

Ajaan Fuang then summarized the lesson of the story by saying, “That’s how you show respect for your teacher.” The conclusion I drew from the story is, one, you do what you’re told; two, if it doesn’t work, try to think up a way of solving the problem yourself; and then three, suggest that alternative to the teacher. So, you’re not just being obedient. You have to use your own powers of observation. And you’re not asking for help until you’ve shown that you’ve tried to figure out a solution on your own. You’re not expecting to get the answer handed to you on a platter.

So this is a theme that ran all the way through the teachings both of Ajaan Lee and of Ajaan Fuang: that you develop your discernment through your desire to do something well. Wisdom comes, not through simply watching things, but from being ardent in mastering your tasks.

This relates to **the fourth point** that’s distinctive in Ajaan Lee’s teachings, which has to do with the way he taught *jhāna*. Like the rest of the forest tradition, he saw no clear line dividing mindfulness practice from concentration practice. However, he was distinctive in how he discussed the five factors of the first *jhāna*, and in how he equated three of the factors of the first *jhāna*—directed thought, singleness of preoccupation, and evaluation—with the three qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency.

Directed thought is the act of directing your thinking to an object. The second *jhāna* factor is singleness of preoccupation, in which you keep focusing on that one object. The third factor is evaluation, which is where you use your powers of observation and ingenuity to see: Is your focus right? Is the breath right? If it’s not, what can you do to change? And then, when you’ve made the change, you evaluate the results of your change. You keep this up until you find something that works.

Then, when there’s a sense of well-being, you evaluate it further: “What’s the best thing to do with this?” You don’t just sit with it. You spread it throughout the body, which gives you a better foundation for your concentration. That relates to the next two factors for the first *jhāna*: pleasure and *pīti*, which can be translated as rapture or refreshment. These two factors are the results of the first three *jhāna* factors. If your

directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation are working, then the pleasure and the rapture will have to come. Ajaan Lee is the only person I've known who singles out the first three factors as being the causes and the other two factors as the results. In other words, pleasure and rapture are not things that you create directly. You develop them through the other three factors—which is what you're doing right now. You're directing your thoughts to the breath, you're trying to stay with the breath as your single preoccupation, and you're evaluating the breath to make it comfortable. Ajaan Lee was also distinctive in equating evaluation with discernment: It's what ardency does to get the mind to settle down.

Another aspect of jhāna that Ajaan Lee taught has to do with the six elements or properties in the body. These terms, too, I found foreign when I first learned about them, but I came to realize that they're describing how you directly experience the body. In other words, you already do have a sense of warmth in your body, and that's what's meant by the fire element or fire property. Similarly with the water element: There are already sensations of coolness in the body. Similarly with the earth element: You already have sensations of solidity. And then the wind element—in Thai, the word for wind is the same as the word for breath: You already have sensations of movement and energy in the body. And so basically, to develop concentration and discernment at the same time, you try to get sensitive to these aspects of your awareness so that you can bring these things into balance in the body, creating a greater sense of pleasure and ease.

How do you do that? First, you try to notice if the body is out of balance—too hot or too cold, too heavy or too light-headed or dizzy—and then you try to think of the opposite element. For example, if you're feeling too cold, there's too much water element, so you ask yourself, "Where in the body right now is the warmest spot?" That's the fire element. Focus there, and just think "warmth." Hold in mind the perception of warmth as you focus there, and you find that the combination of the sensation and the perception will actually augment the actual feeling of warmth. Then you can spread that sensation through the body in the same way that you spread the breath energy through the body. Similarly with balancing breath and earth: When you're too light-headed, focus on the solid parts of the body and let the sensation and perception of solidity spread.

By bringing the elements into balance like this, you find that you're creating a better sense of well-being in the body right now and that, at the same time, you're learning about the power of perception. You also realize that you do have choices in the present moment: The sense of the body isn't just a given. It's full of potentials. This relates to that point we were making about the Buddha's principle of cause and effect two days ago: In the present moment you have many different potentials, and it's up to you to decide which potentials you're going to develop for the best effect. The larger purpose of all these instructions is to show you that there are more

possibilities than what you might have thought of on your own.

And so, as I said earlier about Ajaan Lee's teachings with the breath, all of his teachings give you a sense of possibilities you might not have thought of before. And this is liberating. Even if you don't attain the total ending of stress and suffering in this meditation, at the very least you learn how to deal with issues as they come up in the body, and you master more tools for creating a sense of well-being and clarity in the mind.

A theme that underlies all of Ajaan Lee's teachings is that we're working on meditation as a skill. He would often use analogies involving skills—learning how to sew a shirt, to weave a basket, or to make clay tiles—to explain how to learn through your meditation. He said that you learn the basic principles from your teacher, but if you're really going to get good at that skill, you have to learn directly from the materials that you're working with and from your own actions: in other words, from your ardency and your evaluation.

For example, suppose you're going to weave a basket. You try weaving one and then, once you've got the finished product, you look at what you've got and evaluate it to see what's wrong with it. Then you weave another basket, trying to solve the problem with the previous one, noticing very carefully what you're actually doing so that if you don't like the second basket, you can try a third one based on what you've observed. And if you're ardent in using your powers of observation and evaluation in this way, you eventually become a master basket-weaver. In the same way, when you meditate, you use your mindfulness, ardency, and alertness—all of which, when you're getting settled in concentration—turn into evaluation to become a master breather. It's the same sort of process. Be alert to your breath. If you don't like this breath, try another one, a little different. If you don't like that one, change the next. If you find one you like, keep it going and develop it. All of this involves your ardency. By doing this, you find that you can eventually get the mind to settle down using both your discernment and your powers of concentration, ending up with a state of mind that's both still and clear. Then, when you've found something that works, you use your mindfulness to remember that lesson for meditation sessions in the future. In this way, your mindfulness, concentration, and discernment all work together. In fact, all five of the faculties are working together at the same time.

Q&A

Q: When I observe my breath as given in the instructions, I have the sense that I'm controlling it. This doesn't seem natural. What advice could you give me?

A: The mind is always controlling the breath to one extent or another, but a lot of the control is sub-conscious. Here we're trying to bring this aspect more into your consciousness. As you become more conscious of it, the first thing you do is that you will probably mess it up. But as you get more sensitive to what actually feels good, then your sense of control actually becomes more refined and more skillful. As Ajaan Fuang once said, you're always going to be controlling your breath until your first stage of awakening, so you might as well learn how to do it well.

Q: Do you believe there is a luminosity of the mind when it's relieved from its defilements or its obscurations?

A: There is that luminosity.

Q: Would that also mean that there is not just the neutral mind, as I believe I understood from you yesterday? Wouldn't it imply that there is something deeply, profoundly of a good nature or positive nature in our being?

A: Not necessarily. The fact that the mind is luminous doesn't mean that it's good or free from suffering, and it also doesn't mean that it's free from the potential to become darkened again. The luminosity is a feature of concentration. There's a teacher in the forest tradition, Ajaan Mahā Boowa who, unlike some of the other ajaans, was very explicit in describing what he experienced in meditation. Some of the more interesting passages in his teachings deal with just this issue: the luminosity of the mind. He says that the luminous mind still contains ignorance, and to get past that you have to be able to see that the luminosity itself is a kind of defilement of the mind. The Buddha also talks about the various kinds of luminosity that can appear in the mind—different colors from red, yellow, blue, to white—and the white luminosity is the highest. But it, too, contains inconstancy, and so it's still not free from defilement. So we still have the potential for good and bad even in the luminosity, in spite of the luminosity. It's only when we get past the luminosity that we find what's really worthwhile in the practice.

Q: Can you give a simple explanation of the unborn and undying nature of all phenomena?

A: There is only one thing that's unborn and undying, and the Buddha said it's not a phenomenon. It's what we called the other night "consciousness without surface." A simple explanation of that is that it simply exists. It has nothing to do with cause and effect, it's outside of space and time, but you can actually access it by developing concentration and discernment. Now exactly why you're able to do that, the Buddha never explained. All you need to know is that you can.

Q: So how can you explain this phenomenon, the phenomenon of having a body that does get born and does die with this awareness that is not born, that does not die?

A: Again, you can't explain *why* it's there. Either one. You can explain why the body is born and dies, because there are things in the mind that are born and die, there are causes in the mind that give rise to a body that is born and dies. But as for the connection between this aspect of the mind that's born and dies, and the unborn, undying aspect of the mind, there's no explaining it. It's one of those questions the Buddha never addressed. But he did explain how you can reach that second dimension, and that's all that matters.

Q: One wants to attain nibbāna, the absolute peace, the ultimate, the perfect absorption. Does that mean that life as it is does not suit you?

A: You look at life around you and you see a lot of aging, illness, and death. You see a lot of people making a lot of effort to attain things and then they're taken away from them. You find people so upset with their lives that they kill themselves. In other words, you look at the sufferings in life, and you see things constantly fading away, fading away, being stripped away, and you ask yourself, "Isn't there something better?" That's why we go for nibbāna. So, the answer to this first question is Yes, but if you look at the issue in another way, you can see that the possibility for nibbāna is also part of life. And that's what actually gives brightness to life.

Q: The next question is: If someone is happy with his or her passage through life with its pains and its joys and is not discontent to come back, is not unhappy at the idea of coming back, would that person not be a true Buddhist?

A: Most Buddhists are actually like that. They say, "I'll take my time." The question is: How much more pain do you want before you're ready to go for the end of pain? And that's a question each of us has to answer for him- or herself. The Buddha never pushed anybody to nibbāna. He just said it's here, and here's your opportunity. You're never sure when that opportunity will come again. But it's up to you to decide.

Q: Why are we on Earth?

A: Because we want to be. Each of us has different purposes for wanting to be here, and those purposes keep changing over time. You can look at that fact in a way that's discouraging, but it can also be liberating: You can actually make up your mind to go for one good goal and you have the right to go for that goal. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, "Nobody hired us to be born." So we have the right to do with our lives what we want.

Q: Is it not that we are here through our multiple passages to experience what we are not, in other words to see *anicca* and *anattā* for the purpose of gaining awakening?

A: The purpose of gaining awakening is something you take on yourself. It's not a universal given. Someone once asked the Buddha, "Is everybody going to go to awakening? Or half the world? Or one-third of the world?" And the Buddha refused to answer. So Ven. Ānanda, who was there at the time, was afraid that the person might get upset with the Buddha for not answering, so he pulled the person aside and he gave an analogy. He said, "Suppose there's a fortress. It has one gate and a wise gatekeeper. The gatekeeper goes around the fortress and sees that, aside from the gate, there's not a hole in the wall, not even one big enough for a cat to go through. So he doesn't know how many people will go into the fortress, but he does know that whoever's going to go into the fortress will have to go through the gate. In the same way, the Buddha doesn't know how many people will choose to go for awakening, but he does know that everybody who's going to go to awakening has to go by this path." The reason he doesn't know how many people will reach awakening is because we all have freedom of choice, and he doesn't know how many people will choose to go to awakening. It's up to us.

Mindfulness : The First Stage

Mindfulness is the second intention faculty, in that it governs the actions you're doing as you meditate. This is a fact that's often overlooked. Mindfulness is sometimes defined as just being in the present moment, accepting everything, without doing anything. But the Buddha's own picture of mindfulness is much more proactive. It grows out of persistence—in fact, it actually includes persistence within it. From there it forms the theme for right concentration [§7]. It's something you *do*.

Here's the Canon's definition of mindfulness. Notice that it falls into two parts. The first part describes mindfulness itself; the second describes the establishing of mindfulness.

First, mindfulness: “There's a case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, is mindful. He's endowed with excellent proficiency in mindfulness, remembering and able to call to mind even things that were done and said long ago.” That's the part on mindfulness.

Then the second part, on the establishing of mindfulness: “He remains focused on the body, in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings, in and of themselves... the mind, in and of itself... mental qualities, in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—subduing greed and distress with reference to the world.” [§1]

Notice in the definition of mindfulness that it's a faculty of your active memory. As the passage says, you remember and call to mind things done in the past. Now in the practice, this means that you're calling to mind things that are relevant to what you need to do in the present moment. There's another passage, in Majjhima 117, that talks about the role of mindfulness as being able to remember to abandon unskillful qualities and to remember to give rise to skillful ones. In other words, we're not simply being aware and accepting things as they arise and pass away. We're actually making some things arise and keeping others from arising, just as we're making some things pass away while we're trying to keep others from passing away. This is made clear in a passage in *Anguttara* 4:235, which defines mindfulness as a governing principle [§6]. Its role as a governing principle is to make skillful qualities arise and then to keep them from passing away.

There are several analogies from the Canon that make this point. For instance, there's the image of a man with his head on fire who is mindful to put out the fire as quickly as possible. In other words, he remembers to put it out. He doesn't just accept the fact that his head is on fire or try to enjoy the color of the flames. The role of mindfulness is to remember you've got to put the fire out as your top priority.

Another analogy from the Canon compares mindfulness to a wise gatekeeper for a fortress on the edge of a frontier. He has to know who to let in and who not to let in. He can't just sit there and watch people coming and going, because he has to recognize who's a friend and who's a foe. The fact that he's sitting there might keep some of the foes out, but a lot of them will not be discouraged, and so will slip right into the fortress as he's watching.

So the question is: Why is there the common misunderstanding that mindfulness is simply passive awareness? It comes from an interpretation of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta that views the sutta as providing a full explanation of mindfulness practice. Actually, though, the sutta sets out to explain only one part of the mindfulness formula. Its purpose is to explain what it means to keep focused on something in and of itself. It doesn't address the rest of the formula. In particular, it says nothing about ardency. If you see the sutta as a complete explanation of mindfulness, this might lead you to believe that you don't need to use ardent effort. But if you look at other suttas in the Canon, you see that the Buddha explains again and again how ardency and the rest of the formula should function—and in a very proactive way. It's for this reason that, in order to understand mindfulness practice, you have to look elsewhere in the Canon to complete the picture.

After defining mindfulness, the above passage tells what it means to establish it. The formula describes two activities: one is remaining focused on x in and of itself, and the other is subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. These are the basic activities of getting the mind into concentration: You give yourself an object to gather the mind around, and then you keep everything else out of the mind.

The formula also mentions three qualities of mind that are brought to both activities: ardency, alertness, and mindfulness.

So let's look at these aspects of establishing mindfulness in more detail.

First, with the activities. *Keeping focused* means that you stick with one topic in the midst of everything else that's going on in your awareness. It's like following a thread through a piece of cloth. The image given in the Canon is of a man with a bowl of oil on his head. I gave you part of the image the other day but the full image is this: The man is carrying a bowl of oil on his head, filled to the brim. There's another man following behind him with a sword raised, ready to cut off the head of the first man if he spills a drop of oil. On top of that, the man with the bowl of oil on his head has to walk through a crowd of people. On one side there's a beauty queen

who is singing and dancing, and on the other side is a crowd saying, “Look! The beauty queen is singing and dancing!” So this man has to keep his mind precisely on the bowl of oil. That’s what it means to keep focused.

As for the object of your focus, the formula mentions four frames of reference: body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities. These four can be divided into two sets.

The first set includes the first three frames of reference—body, feelings, and mind—which are the three component factors of your concentration. You’re trying to fill your body with your awareness and also with the feeling of pleasure or equanimity. You try to bring all of these factors into balance because these three things form the world of the becoming that you’re trying to create in your state of concentration.

First, under the **body**, there’s a list of meditation themes that surround the body. The very first one is the breath. The next two are being conscious of the postures of the body and the movements of the body. Another one is being aware of the different properties of the body, i.e., earth, water, wind, and fire. Then there’s an analysis of the body into its many parts, such as hair, teeth, flesh, etc. And finally, there’s the contemplation of its inevitable decay after it dies.

Notice that some of these themes are exercises in simply being aware of the presence of the body in the present moment, but some of them are not. The inevitable decay of the body after death, for instance, is something that’s going to happen in the future. The purpose of this last contemplation is to help deal with specific defilements that come up in the mind right now, particularly to get past any sense of pride or shame or lust you may have around the appearance of the body. This helps you get past any unhealthy attraction or aversion you may have toward the body so that you can focus on what good things can be done with the body, such as the practice. That’s the first frame of reference.

The second frame of reference is **feelings**. These are feeling-tones of pleasure, pain or neither pleasure nor pain. The Buddha divides each of these three feeling-tones into two sorts: what he calls feelings of the flesh and feelings not of the flesh. It’s a strange terminology, but basically feelings of the flesh are any feelings related to the five senses. Feelings not of the flesh are feelings that surround the practice of the path. For example, pleasures not of the flesh are the pleasures of concentration. Pains not of the flesh are the mental pains you feel when you think about how much further you have to go on the path. The Buddha actually says that this is a useful pain. It’s better to focus on that sort of pain than on pains of the flesh, because at least it gives you motivation to keep practicing.

Now, when we’re dealing with feelings, it’s important to note that this is not simply an issue of which feelings arise willy-nilly on their own. After all, remember the teaching on kamma: There are potentials coming in from the past, and at any

moment there are many things you can choose from. What you actually experience will depend on what you choose to do in the present with those potentials. Some of those potentials are for feelings of these various sorts. Because feelings can have an impact on shaping the mind for good or for ill, we try to focus on encouraging the potentials that will be useful, whether they are of the flesh or not of the flesh.

Remember, the Buddha didn't reject all pleasures of the senses. As long as they don't give rise to unskillful mental states, they're okay. Some of the examples given in the Canon include the pleasures of being in nature, the pleasures of being in seclusion, and the pleasures of having harmony in society. These pleasures are all fine. Also, as long as the pleasure doesn't require unskillful activities to give rise to it, then it's okay. This is why right livelihood is part of the path.

As for the third frame of reference, the **mind**, this covers mind states. The Buddha gives a list pairing different skillful and unskillful mind states, and the list goes in ascending order as your practice develops. The message of this list is that you don't just sit there with unskillful states. You try to abandon unskillful ones and develop skillful ones. For example, the mind state that's unconcentrated is paired with a concentrated mind; a restrictive mind state is paired with one that's more expansive. In each case, you obviously want to develop, out of the potentials coming in from the past, the positive alternative.

So those three frames of reference—body, feelings, and mind—form the first set of frames of reference.

The second set is **mental qualities**. It sounds like one frame of reference, but actually the Buddha gives a list of many different frames of reference within this category. For example, he talks about unskillful mental qualities like the five hindrances; the fetters based on the six senses; the five clinging-aggregates, which is the first noble truth; and craving, which is the second noble truth. Other frames of reference list skillful mental qualities, such as the seven factors for awakening, the abandoning of craving, and the noble eightfold path, which are the third and fourth noble truths.

Now these mental qualities are things you have to either abandon or develop to help bring body, feelings, and mind into a state of concentration or—if you're already in a state of concentration—to develop the concentration even further so that it can become a basis for your discernment. We'll be discussing these mental qualities in more detail tomorrow.

So, those are the four frames of reference: the four things you can keep in mind as you're practicing concentration.

Now it's important to notice right off the bat that even though it sounds like these categories are four different meditation themes, in practice they all come together. When you're focused on the breath, for example, your feelings and your mind states

are right there. And then you use your memory of skillful and unskillful qualities to clear away unskillful qualities that would get the mind away from the breath and to nurture the skillful qualities that would foster your concentration on the body even further. Ajaan Lee calls this a practice of four in one, and one in four. All four come together right at one thing: the breath.

Also notice that you're focusing on these things in and of themselves. In other words, you're not focusing on the body in the context of the world outside—for instance, whether it looks attractive to other people or is strong enough to do the work you need to do in the world. You're simply dealing with the body in and of itself, on its own terms.

The Canon gives several analogies for this part of the practice. It's like a post for tying an elephant down when you want to train it. Or it's like a post for tying down six animals. This image is particularly interesting. There's a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a hyena, a snake, and a monkey, and each of them is tied to a leash. Now if you just tie the leashes to one another, the animals will try to go off in the direction they want: The monkey wants to go up the tree, the bird wants to fly up into the sky, the dog wants to go into the village, the snake wants to go into the ant hill—I've never known snakes to go after ants, but who knows?—the hyena wants to go into a charnel ground, and the crocodile wants to go down into the river. As the Buddha says, whichever animal is strongest will pull the other animals in its direction. And, of course, it'll be the crocodile. It'll pull all of the other animals down into the river where they'll all drown. That's what it's like when you go around with your senses not guarded. Your goodness gets drowned.

However, if you have mindfulness of the body as a post and you attach the leashes to the post, then no matter how much the senses pull toward attractive things, nobody gets pulled away from the post.

So the purpose of keeping focused on the body in and of itself in this case is to keep the mind firmly in place so that you can practice restraint of the senses, remembering the frame of reference that deals with the fetters arising at the six senses.

Another analogy that the Buddha gives is of a quail. The story goes that a hawk swoops down, catches a quail, and carries him off. The quail bemoans his fate, "Oh, my lack of merit! If only I had been in my ancestral territory, this hawk would have been no match for me." Piqued, the hawk asks him, "What is your territory?" The quail says, "A field that has been newly plowed with stones piled up." So the hawk tells him, "Okay, I'll let you go. Go back to your territory, but even so, you won't escape me." So the quail goes down into his territory, he stands up on a stone, and he taunts the hawk: "Okay, come and get me, you hawk! Come and get me, you hawk!" So the hawk swoops down again. When the quail sees that the hawk is coming at full speed, he hides behind the stone, and the hawk crashes into the stone

and dies.

In the Buddha's explanation of this image, the quail's ancestral territory stands for the four establishments of mindfulness. As for the territory that's outside of his ancestral territory, that stands for when you're fantasizing about the pleasures of the five senses. The hawk represents Māra—the king of death—which means that if you're wandering around in the pleasures of the senses, Māra's going to get you.

That covers the activity of keeping focused on the four frames of reference.

The other activity of establishing mindfulness is subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. This is basically abandoning anything that would be distracting you from your topic of concentration: in other words, the beauty queen and the crowd.

Those are the two activities in establishing mindfulness.

Now let's look at the three qualities you bring to these two activities: ardency, alertness, and mindfulness. We talked about these qualities some this morning. Remember that mindfulness means remembering where to stay focused and what to do with whatever comes up: what to abandon, what to develop, what to prevent, what to bring to culmination—in other words, all the duties of persistence.

Alertness means being clearly aware of what you're doing while you're doing it, along with the results of what you're doing. This means that you're not choicelessly aware of just anything at all in the present moment. You're focused on your actions.

Ardency is the quality of persistence. You put your whole heart into doing this right. This is where you're actually fabricating your sense of the present moment.

Now, all three of these qualities gain guidance from discernment. Discernment teaches mindfulness what to keep in mind, it tells alertness where to stay focused in the present moment, and it teaches ardency what you've got to do.

Ajaan Lee, however, when he's focusing on these three qualities, pinpoints ardency as the main discernment quality among these three, the discernment lying in your realization that all the Buddha's teachings that you've heard are not just to talk about or to think about. They're truths that carry duties. If you're wise enough to sincerely want to put an end to suffering, and wise enough to realize that the end of suffering is going to depend on your own actions, the desire to become more skillful in your actions is what lies at the essence of wisdom. In terms of the noble eightfold path, this connects with right resolve.

So how do these three qualities apply to the two activities of establishing mindfulness? With regard to keeping focused on, say, the breath in and of itself, mindfulness reminds you to stay with the breath. It also reminds you of the various ways of dealing with the breath that you've learned from the past that will make it easier to stay with the breath. Alertness watches over both the breath and the mind to make sure they stay together. And ardency is the whole-hearted desire that makes

you extra alert—with more sensitivity to the breath and the mind—and more consistently mindful.

In terms of subduing greed and distress with reference to the world, if you find yourself wandering away from the breath, alertness is what actually sees that; mindfulness reminds you to return to the breath—or, if the mind doesn't want to return, it reminds you of *why* you should want to return. Mindfulness also reminds you of the various strategies for returning, as we discussed the other morning. And ardency is the desire to get back to the breath as quickly and as effectively as possible.

Now, you'll notice that, as you assemble these elements of establishing mindfulness together, you're creating a state of becoming. You've got the body, feelings, and the mind as your world, as your frames of reference. Your sense of yourself is your identity as the meditator trying to keep your mindfulness, alertness, ardency, and concentration solid and to pull yourself back out of other becomings that would lure you away from the world of your concentration.

The more alertness you can bring to this process—especially, being alert to any signs that you're about to wander off—the better.

I'll give you an analogy that's not in the Canon. This is another one from a science fiction story. I didn't read all that much science fiction when I was young, but once when I was in Bangkok I happened to open a cabinet in the room where I was staying, and there was a book in English, a book of science fiction stories. At that point, I was starved of English, so I read the whole book. My favorite story involved a spaceship that moved, not by using fuel, but by changing its frame of reference. If its frame of reference was the Earth, it would stay on Earth. If its frame of reference was the Sun, it would move away from the Earth at the speed that the Earth is revolving around the Sun. If it made its frame of reference the center of the galaxy, it moved really fast. If it made its frame of reference the center of another galaxy, it was out of this galaxy entirely. The plot of the story revolved around the fact that the inhabitants of the rocket ship would blank out for a little while as the ship changed its frame of reference.

The reason I liked the story was because it reflected how the mind functions. First we're with one desire as our frame of reference, but if we then make another desire our frame of reference, we move into an entirely new world, while we fall unconscious for a brief moment as we switch worlds—somewhat in the same way that, during a play, they pull the curtain down as they're changing the scenery to help maintain the illusion of reality in the sets.

So what we're trying to do here as we meditate is to take this ability to change our frame of reference and learn how to use it skillfully, without blanking out. We try not to blank out as the mind begins to exhibit signs that it wants to leave the world of the

breath. And we try to be extra careful as we come back to the body as our main foundation, remembering to do so in such a way that the mind will want to stay.

So all of this—the two activities and the three qualities of mind—are what we do to establish mindfulness to the point where it becomes concentration. For example, as you focus on the breath in and of itself, you put aside any distractions, any other mental worlds, that would interfere. Another duty of mindfulness is to remember to stay with the breath and to keep in mind any techniques you've learned from the past. That's how to stay here. You also remember how to give rise to a sense of pleasure with the breath. The duty of alertness is to be alert both to the breath and to the mind. The duty of ardency is to keep coming back to the breath when you see that you've slipped away, and to be extra sensitive to the breath while you're with it so that you can find pleasure in it.

All of these factors come together and strengthen one another. When they get strong enough, the mind enters the first *jhāna*. In Ajaan Lee's explanation, mindfulness becomes the factors of directed thought and singleness of preoccupation, alertness and ardency become the factor of evaluation that adjusts the breath and uses the pleasure from the breath to give the mind a good place to settle down. When these causes come together, then they give the results, which are pleasure and refreshment or rapture.

It's in this way that your persistence, your mindfulness, and your concentration all work together to create the skillful state of becoming that is the path.

We'll talk more about mindfulness tomorrow, but for now, let's meditate.

Q: Which other suttas complete the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta?

A: There's no one particular sutta that completes it, although the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, MN 118, is a good one to start with: It shows how working with the breath in a proactive way brings all four establishings of mindfulness to completeness. From there, you have to bring information in from several other suttas. The English book, *Right Mindfulness*—which is available on dhammatalks.org—contains the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* together with passages from other suttas that help to flesh out the teaching on establishing mindfulness, in particular, ardency. The translation of the *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, DN 22, on dhammatalks.org, also has footnotes containing sutta passages that flesh out the topic. From there, you can take the numbers of the suttas, either in the book or in the footnotes to DN 22, and you can look those passages up in the French translations.

Letting Go & Holding On

April 27, 2017

We've had a request for more stories about Ajaan Fuang, Ajaan Lee, and Ajaan Mun. I have two stories.

As I mentioned the other day, one of the things I noticed about the Thai ajaans is their sense of humor. With Ajaan Mun, this might be unexpected. You see those pictures of Ajaan Mun in which his eyes look like they could drill right through you. That's the kind of gaze he had because he was a very serious practitioner, and he had learned to drill right through his defilements. But he also had a sense of humor. This was part of his wisdom, the part that allowed him to step back from his defilements and put the events of his mind into perspective.

Ajaan Fuang tells a story of a time when he first went to stay with Ajaan Mun. There was a nuns' community just down the road, and when the monks went for alms, the nuns would come out and put alms in their bowls. There was one young nun in particular who seemed to be especially interested in Ajaan Fuang. She would fix special central Thai food for him and would knit little containers for his spoon and other utensils. Ajaan Mun noticed this. First he checked out Ajaan Fuang and he saw that Ajaan Fuang was not interested. So he decided that it was now time to help the nun. Later on that week, the group of nuns came to Ajaan Mun for some instructions, and he started with the question, "Are you all observing the eight precepts?" And they said, "Yes." Then he told a story of Lady Visākhā, who saw large groups of people observing the eight precepts, and so she went to each group to ask them why. First she went to a group of old people, and they answered that they were observing the eight precepts because they wanted to be reborn in heaven. Then she went to other groups and finally came to a group of young women. Their answer was, "We want something better than heaven. We want a husband." That was the end of the special central Thai food and the little knitted things. That was Ajaan Mun's sense of humor.

As for Ajaan Fuang, there are lots of stories I could tell, but one in particular I like. When we were building the chedi at the monastery, lots of people would come from Bangkok on the weekend to help with the work. One weekend, someone sent along a bushel basket of oranges, and there was one young man in the group who

kept looking at the oranges and finally he came up with a good excuse for eating them. He said, “We’re all children of Ajaan Fuang”—because, after all, the ajaans in Thailand are usually called Than Paw or Luang Paw, which means venerable father. And so the young man went on to say, “Ajaan Fuang wouldn’t want his children to be hungry. He would probably want us to eat the oranges.” And then he added, “Anyone who doesn’t eat an orange is not really a child of Ajaan Fuang.” So they passed out the oranges. One woman in the group didn’t feel good about this, but to show that she was Ajaan Fuang’s child, she just ate one section. When they got to the monastery and they told Ajaan Fuang what had happened, he got quite stern with them. He said, “Look, anyone who eats food that’s meant for monks without first asking permission will get reborn as a hungry ghost.” This frightened the woman who had eaten just the one section, so she said, “But I only ate one section.” And Ajaan Fuang replied, smiling, “Well, as long as you’re going to be a hungry ghost, you might as well eat as much as you can while you can.”

Those are the stories. However, there’s a more serious point I’d like to make, which is that all of the ajaans teach that even though the practice is a practice of letting go, still you have to let go in stages. You don’t let go all at once. In Ajaan Lee’s image, if you let go without having created the good things in the path, you’re like a poor person who lets go of money because you don’t have any. As he said, the Buddha wants us to let go like rich people. In other words, you develop your wealth and then once you have it, you don’t have to carry it around. You just let it sit in your house and then when you need it, it’s there. If you let go like a poor person, though, then when you need these things, you won’t have anything. Another analogy he gave is that it’s like a person with a wound who says, “I don’t want to take care of this wound. After all, it is inconstant, stressful, and not-self.” Of course, what’s going to happen is that the wound will get infected and it can make you sick or even kill you. The wise way, of course, is that if you have a wound, you take care of it, and then once it’s healed, you don’t have to take care of it anymore.

The other ajaans make the same point with other analogies. For example, with Ajaan Fuang: When I first went to study with him, it was soon after the American moon landing, and so he told me that the practice was like going to the moon. First, you need the booster rockets, and then as the booster rockets use up their fuel, you let them go, one by one by one. The capsule can get to the moon because it’s dropped the boosters, but if it weren’t first attached to them, it wouldn’t be able to get there. In other words, you let go step by step.

Ajaan Mahā Boowa’s image is that the practice is like climbing a ladder up to the roof of a house. You hold onto one rung and then you hold onto a higher rung. Only then do you let go of the lower rung to hold onto the next higher one. You keep on with this process until finally you get to the roof of the house, and that’s when you can let go of the ladder entirely.

Ajaan Chah's image is that it's like coming back from a market with a banana in your hand. Someone sees you and asks, "Why are you carrying the banana?"

"Because I want to eat it," you say.

And then the person says, "Are you going to eat the peel, too?"

"No."

"Then why are you holding onto the peel?"

That's where Ajaan Chah asks, "With what would you answer that person?" And his answer is interesting, in that it has two layers. The first layer is: "You answer with desire." In other words, to come up with a good answer, you need to have desire for a good answer. It's through that desire that your discernment develops.

The second layer to Ajaan Chah's answer, then, is the answer you give to the other person: "Because the time hasn't come yet to let go of the peel." If you let go of the peel right now, the banana becomes mush in your hand. So Ajaan Chah's making two points here. One, of course, is that you let go in stages. There will come a time when you let go of the peel. If you let go of your precepts or your concentration before they do their work, your mind will be mush. But the other point is that in order to give rise to discernment, you need to have desire. Desire is an important part of the path. Eventually, you'll let go of desire, too, but right now, the time hasn't come yet to let go of it.

Ajaan Lee would comment that people who've been reading a lot of Dhamma want to go straight to the teaching on inconstancy, stress, and not-self right away, and that way they treat even virtue, concentration, and discernment as being inconstant, stressful, and not-self. As a result, these things never get developed and the path never gets anywhere. As he noted, when you're practicing concentration, you're actually fighting against the three qualities of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. You're trying to create a state of mind that's constant, pleasant, and under your control. Only when you've succeeded in doing that can you see the subtle levels of inconstancy, stress, and not-self that are still there in the concentration, and that's when you can let go of both sides: what's constant and what's inconstant, what's stressful and what's pleasant, what's under your control and what's not—in other words, self and not-self. And that's when the mind gains freedom.

Back in the late 1990's there was a controversy in Thailand. A Buddhist sect claimed that nibbāna was your true self, and other monks came out to say publicly, No, nibbāna is not-self. This controversy became so heated that it actually appeared in all the newspapers. Can you imagine that in France? *Le Monde* and *Figaro* running articles on whether nibbāna is self or not-self? At any rate, someone finally went to ask Ajaan Mahā Boowa whether nibbāna is self or not-self, and his answer was: Nibbāna is nibbāna. Then he explained: We use the teaching on self in order to develop good qualities in ourselves and then we use the teaching on not-self to let go

of everything in the mind. And at that point you have to let go of not-self, too. Only then do you get to nibbāna. He said, basically, that self and not-self are like the stairway up to your house. First you need to use the stairway to get to the house, but once you're there, you don't need the stairway anymore.

So, when you're sitting here meditating, you are holding on. You're holding onto your breath, you're holding onto your desire to get the mind concentrated. It's simply a matter of learning how to hold on skillfully. If someone comes along and says, "Hey, why don't you just let go?" You tell them, "I still need the banana peel."

You can also think of an image from the Canon. You know the image of the raft going across the river. When you get to the other side, you don't carry the raft with you anymore. That's the part of the story that everyone focuses on. They forget the other part, which is that while you're crossing the river, you have to hold onto the raft. If you make a show of letting go of the raft, you're just going to get swept down the river.

Another image from the Canon is of trying to get milk out of a cow. As the Buddha said, if you try to get milk by twisting the horn, you're not going to get any milk, and you'll also harass the cow. Now the problem sometimes with our practice is that we're twisting the horn of the cow, and someone comes along and comments, "You know, you can stop twisting the horn, and things will be a lot easier." And you find that, Yes, you do feel better by not twisting the horn—but you still don't get any milk. You have to do the work of pulling on the udder, and that's when you'll get the milk you want.

Q: These teachings explain the middle way, don't they?

A: Basically, what's middle about the middle way is not that you're halfway between pleasure and pain. It's a matter of learning how to approach pleasure and pain not as ends, but as means. You use pleasure and use pain for a higher purpose. For example, we're using the pleasure of jhāna as part of the path, and we're also using whatever pain comes up in the course of the practice as something to investigate, to comprehend, to gain discernment. The middle way means just this: learning how to use these things for a higher purpose, even things that we'll eventually have to let go of. For example, you know you're going to have to let go of your aggregates at some point, but first you have to use them to construct your path. In fact, it's through using them that you get to understand them. That's the point Ajaan Lee was making. You can make an analogy that the aggregates are like bricks, and you have the choice of either carrying them on your shoulder—and suffering from them—or putting them down on the ground to pave your road.

Q&A

Q: You've said that letting go should be done only in stages and it should be done at the right moment. You presented it as if it were something like an act of will, but sometimes one finds that letting go just happens on its own, when the conditions are right. So, what is the exact case?

A: Actual letting go is not something you will, but the causes come from understanding your attachment to something and seeing no more reason to maintain that attachment. At that point, the mind lets go without your having to tell it. But to get there, you have to will yourself to contemplate the attachment. The understanding has to come from the contemplating, but you can't determine beforehand when your understanding will reach the point where it's ready to let go. That's the part you can't control.

The problem is when people let go before they're really ready. For example, when you get discouraged in the practice and you decide, "Well, maybe I shouldn't meditate. Maybe my desire for jhāna is a bad thing, so I should let go of my desire for jhāna." That kind of letting go comes from laziness and that's what you have to watch out for.

Q: Can one say that we live in three times, in other words, past, present, and future, thinking about your actions of the past and preparing for the future?

A: That is the case: We do live in three times. Alfred Brendel, the Austrian pianist, went to America for his last concert tour there a couple of years ago. He's famous for being more cerebral than most classical pianists, and so an interviewer asked him, "What is it like while you're playing the piano?" He replied, "You're living in three time spaces. You have to keep in mind what you've been playing up until that point, and also where you want the piece to go in the future, at the same time being aware of what you're actually doing. Because sometimes you find that what you're actually doing is not in line with what you had planned and you have to decide, 'Is this going in a better direction than I had planned, and should I follow that new direction? Or is it going in a bad direction and I have to correct it?'"

And that's basically what we're doing as we meditate. We have a sense of where the mind has been developing, where we want it to go, but also what we're doing right now. And again, we have to evaluate, "Is this going in a better direction or is it

going off track and, if so, how do we put it back on track?” When you think about those three qualities that go into mindfulness practice, mindfulness is referring to the past, ardency has to do with the future and the present, and alertness is right there in the present moment.

Q: Where are your thoughts stored away and where do they come from?

A: That’s one of those questions the Buddha doesn’t answer. And this is an important point. Remember, the Buddha said he answered one question—how to put an end to suffering—and he explained the actions of your mind as they relate to that. As for other aspects of the mind that are not relevant to that question, he put them aside as a waste of time that interferes with the practice. So, the question, “Where do you store your memories?” is not really a problem. The real problem is: “Are they good memories to use or not?”

Q: It’s hard to find the right words to say this well, but with your sense of humor, you’ll understand the question. Why do you intellectualize meditation to this extent, something that’s not really on the order of the intellect? Meditation is for everyone, isn’t it, and not just for those who are learned?

A: As with any skill, meditation has its own vocabulary and behind the vocabulary is a mindset, a view of the world. We tend to think of the Thai ajaans as just being natural meditators, but they, too, grew up in a culture that was aimed in this direction, toward training the mind, and they themselves had to study Buddhist texts in order to acquire the vocabulary that helps to explain what’s involved in that training: what you have to notice, what you can ignore, and what you have to do with what you notice. In the case of mettā, we’re training ourselves in qualities of the heart, but this training also requires some understanding. This is why we’re dealing with these concepts, because the more the concepts are aimed at getting the best results, the better your heart and the mind work together.

Q: This is an illustration. I would like to better understand *sati*. Is it an impersonal consciousness without ego? Is it a consciousness that is connected through the self that is stuck on the ground of pure consciousness? Is it an awakened consciousness that comes from the gradual development of attention, in which case, can one listen to one’s own thoughts without being their prisoner? I don’t understand its relationship to memory as you’ve been discussing.

A: Much of what we hear about *sati* or mindfulness as being a pure consciousness or a pure awareness actually is related to what the Buddha taught about equanimity. In other words, you’re trying to be as aware but calm as you can while watching things coming and going. As for mindfulness, that’s actually a quality of the memory. Now you might say, “Well, it doesn’t really matter what you call it, it’s just a

matter of words.” The problem is that equanimity is not always skillful, but you always need mindfulness to direct the mind. Equanimity just says, “Okay, I will just let whatever happens, happen,” and sometimes that’s skillful and sometimes it’s not. But having good mindfulness is what helps you remember the lessons you’ve learned from the past as to when it’s good to let go, and when you have to be more proactive to change things.

Q: Is mindfulness our original consciousness that appears at the birth of the physical body and then lasts as long as saṃsāra, obscured by the defilements? Or would it be a permanent consciousness because it accompanies us in all our life? Or is it impermanent because it develops gradually through the force of attention?

A: There is no permanent consciousness in the Buddha’s teachings. We have moments of consciousness that follow in a process, a process that comes from previous lifetimes and lasts beyond this lifetime as well, as long as we’re going to be in saṃsāra. It continues because there are conditions to keep it going. The main condition is craving. This process ends totally only when craving ends. The Buddha never talks about original awareness or original consciousness, simply that there is a luminous state of consciousness that can be obscured. But then there’s another consciousness, which we talked about earlier in the week, which is the consciousness of awakening. You can’t say that it’s permanent because something permanent has to be lasting through time, and this consciousness is outside of time.

Mindfulness : The Second Stage

Last night we talked about the first stage of establishing mindfulness. Tonight we'll talk about the second stage. This is the stage in which your mindfulness matures to the point of mastering concentration as a skill. This means learning to bring the mind to concentration not only when the conditions inside and out are good, but also when they're far from ideal. The analogy for this phase is the wise, experienced cook who knows how to read his master, providing what the master likes, noticing how his likes will change, and also keeping away things that will be bad for the master. In terms of getting the mind into concentration, this means seeing what does and doesn't work in trying to get the mind to settle down, and learning to provide what the mind likes and needs to get and stay concentrated regardless of the situation.

The texts describe this stage in these terms:

“There is the case where a monk remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body, remains focused on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, remains focused on the phenomenon of origination and passing away with regard to the body—ardent, alert, and mindful—subduing greed and distress with reference to the world.” [SI]

The passage goes on to say the same thing for feelings, mind states, and mental qualities.

Notice the word “origination” here in the phrase, “focused on origination.” It doesn't mean arising. It means causing. You're focused on what causes things to arise and causes things to pass away. Remember your classes in science: You didn't learn about causation just by watching things passively. You learned by fiddling with potential causal factors to see what changes would give rise to what results.

This is a principle that doesn't apply only to science. For example, in cooking, you want to learn about eggs. You don't just sit and watch the eggs. You learn by making egg dishes out of them. Concentration is like making the mind into a soufflé. You learn about the eggs and you get to enjoy the results of your efforts at the same time. Ajaan Lee uses the image of taking care of a baby: It requires the same three qualities that we've been talking about in the course of the week. You have to be mindful to look after the baby all of the time, remembering what's worked in the

past when a problem comes up; you have to be alert to what results your actions are getting in making the baby happy and healthy; and you're ardent to do your best. This includes using your ingenuity to figure out how best to solve problems as they come up with the child: when to feed the child, when to give it something to play with, when to let it cry itself out. The same principles apply to meditation.

Last night when we talked about the four frames of reference, we noted that the first three—body, feelings, and mind—are the component factors of getting the mind into right concentration, whereas dhammas or mental qualities, are supplementary factors to watch out for, that you develop or abandon so as to bring the other three into a good balance, where the body is suffused both with awareness and with a feeling of pleasure. These dhammas are the factors that you use in this second stage of the practice to get the mind into concentration.

As we said yesterday, this fourth frame of reference actually includes several different frames of reference: the five hindrances, the seven factors for awakening, the six sense media, the five clinging-aggregates, and the four noble truths. Tonight we'll focus on all of these dhammas except for the four noble truths, which we'll save for Saturday night.

Let's start with **the five hindrances**. These are the things you need to clear away when you're trying to get the mind into concentration. The first hindrance is sensual desire, second is ill will, third is sloth and torpor, fourth is restlessness and anxiety, and fifth is uncertainty. Dealing with these hindrances comes under the factor of putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. There are three steps in dealing with each of these hindrances.

The first step is to recognize them as hindrances. This, in and of itself, is an important accomplishment, because usually when sensual desire arises, for instance, the first thought is not, "Ah yes, this is a hindrance." The first thought is, "Let's go for it." The same with ill will. When you have ill will for someone, all you can think of is how much that person really deserves your ill will. Similarly with sloth and torpor: When you're getting really sleepy, the thought is, "My body really does need to rest." When you're worried about things, you tell yourself, "I really do have to worry about this." And when you're uncertain about things, you feel that your doubts are justified. Instead of seeing these things as hindrances, you side with them.

When you're trying to get the mind into concentration, you have to switch sides. Recognize that these are hindrances to getting the mind settled down. That's the duty of alertness and mindfulness: noticing that the hindrance is there, and recognizing that it is a hindrance.

The second step is to then develop the desire to be free from them. This is the duty of ardency, and it starts with seeing their dangers. For example, when you're sleepy and you think, "I should go to sleep," you have to remember that nobody ever

gained awakening while asleep, and as they say in Thailand, if you tried to count the number of years you've been sleeping in all of your many lifetimes, you find that those years are uncountable. So in this second step you tell yourself, "Maybe I should fight this. Maybe tonight I should stay awake." You can use a similar sort of contemplation with the other hindrances.

Once you've gotten past these first two steps—recognizing the hindrances as hindrances and deciding to fight them—then you're ready for the third step, remembering and then applying the different techniques for undercutting specific hindrances as they arise. These are the further duties of mindfulness and ardency. We talked about these techniques the other day when discussing the approaches for dealing with distracting thoughts, so let's review them briefly. The first approach is changing the topic that you're thinking about, to see whether you need to gladden the mind, to make it steadier, or to release it, and then using the appropriate technique. The second approach is to examine the drawbacks of that hindrance even further; the third approach is to ignore the hindrance, in other words, just let it go off to the side of your mind, while you give more attention to your meditation object. The fourth approach is to relax around the thought-formation of the hindrance. And then the fifth approach is to just force the mind down and say, "I'm not going to think that thought."

When you're thinking about gladdening or steadying the mind, you might bring in other topics that are supplementary to the breath. For example, recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha, generosity, virtue, or the brahmavihāras—the sublime attitudes: These are themes to gladden the mind. For steadying the mind, you can use equanimity or recollection of death. As for techniques for releasing the mind, we'll discuss those Saturday night.

The Buddha says that, in addition to focusing on these dhammas inside yourself, you can also focus them outside, on other people. You can't see the dhammas in their minds, of course, but you can reflect on the fact that their situation is similar to yours and yours is similar to theirs. For instance, as an example of extrapolating from self to others: You're subject to aging, illness, and death, and so is everybody else. This gives rise to a sense of *saṃvega* and also takes away the sting of, "Why is this happening to me?"

You can also extrapolate from others to yourself. For example, if you're feeling very strong sensual desire or ill will, think about other people whose lives have been ruined by sensual desire or through their ill will, and this could also happen to you.

There's one sutta where the Buddha talks about when the mind is unable to settle down, it's because it has a fever in the body or a fever in the mind. So whatever way of thinking gets rid of that fever is perfectly fine. Then, when the mind has been made calm and peaceful with these methods, you can simply return to the breath and stay with the sense of ease around the breath, and that counts as right concentration.

Those are the five hindrances.

The second frame is **the seven factors for awakening**. These are actually factors that go into the concentration itself. They fall into three sets. The first set contains only one member, which is mindfulness. That's a factor that's always useful. The other two factors are useful at particular times: when the mind has too little energy or when it has too much.

The second set includes what's called analysis of qualities, which is how you evaluate what's going on in the mind; persistence, which is the same as ardency; and then finally rapture or refreshment. These three qualities are energizing, so they're useful to develop when the mind is too slothful or its energy is low. If, for example, you're feeling sleepy, you make the effort to analyze what's going on in the mind. You ask yourself, "How do you know you're sleepy? Where do you feel the symptoms? Are they around the eyes? Are they around your forehead?" Analyzing these things in this way stirs up some energy in the mind that helps to pull you away from the symptoms of sleepiness. You find another part of the mind that's not really sleepy now and use it to help pull you out.

One technique that I've found that works well is when I wake up in the morning and I tell myself I need some more sleep, part of me will say, "Wait a minute, you've said this before." And so then it poses the question, "Which part of the body is too heavy to get up? Try lifting the arm." The arm goes up. "Try the other arm. How about my head? How about my legs? And finally the torso?" Then when the torso is up, I'm up. So that's a very simple instance of analysis of qualities.

The remaining three factors for awakening, though, are calming: serenity, concentration, and equanimity. These are useful when the mind has too much energy and needs steadying. If you find, for instance, that you're worried about something, you can ask yourself, "What if I died right now and I were a dead spirit, looking at the things I was worried about when I was alive, and realizing that these things can't touch me anymore?" Then look to see: "Is there a part of my mind that's not touched by these things even now while I'm alive?" Then you just stay right there. That calms things down. This is called making use of serenity and equanimity.

Again, you can use external examples to help you with this. When you think about how difficult it is to practice, remember other people went through these difficulties before: They were able to do it, why not you? Another example from my own practice: People would sometimes come to our monastery and say, "Ah, there's a Western monk here. Now, can they really understand things?" Western monks there are sometimes regarded like dancing elephants: It's amazing that they can dance at all, but you don't really expect them to dance well. So, something inside me would say, "I'll show them"—in other words, using a defilement to spark my persistence. I always liked Ajaan Fuang's response one time when a person asked, "How could a Westerner ordain?" He said, "Don't Westerners have hearts?"

The next frame of reference is **the six sense media**. These are directly related to the practice of sense restraint because you're not simply aware of the fact that you have an eye or ear or nose or whatever, but you're more focused on the fact that fetters can build up around those senses, and those fetters are not coming from sights, sounds, smells, or tastes. They come from within. They're your own greed, aversion, and delusion. If you're letting your greed, aversion, and delusion do the looking and listening, etc., during the day, then they're going to be hard to expel from the mind when you sit down and meditate. So you have to exercise restraint throughout the day.

Now, this doesn't mean not looking or not listening to things at all. It means learning to look at your engagement with the senses as part of a causal process: Why are you looking, what is your purpose in looking, and what results are you getting from looking at things in that way? If you see that there are any unskillful states acting either as causes or results, then you've got to look or listen in another way.

For example, if you see someone who's really beautiful and attractive, you have to ask yourself, "Is there an unattractive side to that person?" Or if there's somebody you really hate, "Is there a good side to that person?" Or if you see an object that's attractive that you would like to buy, then stop and think about it: "When I buy this, then I'm just adding one more item to the pile of junk in my house." Then think about all the problems of ownership. Remember the BMW Chili? Suppose you get your new BMW and someone takes a key and scratches the side of the car out of spite. The fact that you've bought the BMW opens you up to that kind of thing. But if you stick with your old car, nobody would be tempted to want to key it.

In other words, you look at things in another way in order to pull yourself away from them. Ajaan Lee has a nice image for all this. You can remember that not only do you live in your body, but there are also other beings in your body as well, such as all the germs going through your blood system, or the worms down in your intestines. When you look at something that makes you really hungry, who's looking? Is it you or the worms?

Now, having this kind of restraint requires a certain sense of well-being in the body. Otherwise, you're going to be so hungry for quick pleasures that you won't have the patience to engage in restraint. This is why the Buddha gave the image of the six animals tied to a post: the bird, the dog, the hyena, the monkey, the snake, and the crocodile. The post isn't there just to hold them through force. You've got food around the post: the pleasure of concentration. If you can stay with the sense of pleasant breath energy in the body as you go through the day, you're not going to be so quick to run into the village or down into the river or over into the cemetery. You maintain that sense of well-being throughout the day without having to indulge in pleasures that are harmful for the mind.

Remember, a basic principle of kamma is that you have many potentials in the

present moment. So in terms of talking about sense restraint, the Buddha is actually making you aware that you have more potentials for pleasure, more skillful pleasures, than you might have thought of otherwise. So, don't think of sense restraint as confinement. It's actually opening you up to more possibilities. You can also think about the fact that if you're falling for something that you're hearing or seeing, you're becoming a slave to those things. If you're not falling for them, you're free. That's the third frame of reference.

The next one—and the last one we're going to talk about tonight—is **the five clinging-aggregates**. This is going to require a fair amount of analysis.

What are the aggregates? They're five activities. Sometimes you hear that the Buddha says that you *are* the five aggregates, but that's very much not true. What he actually says is that we create our sense of self out of the aggregates. But that's only one way that we cling to them, and it's in the clinging that we suffer.

So let's look at these five activities, because we're going to find that they don't have to be suffering. If you learn how to use them properly, they can become part of the path. The first activity in the aggregates is form, which is your sense of the body. This is an activity in that you have to actively work at maintaining your sense of the form of the body. The second activity is feeling. The third is perception, the labels you apply to things: when you look at this and you say "microphone," you look at what's above you and you say "ceiling." Those are perceptions. Perceptions either are individual words or individual images that you apply to things, identifying them and giving them a meaning—as when you see a red light, and you think, "Stop." The fourth aggregate is fabrication, which covers all the intentional ways you put things together in your mind. For example, when you think about the ceiling, you tell yourself, "They did a beautiful job." That's a fabrication. Other kinds of fabrication are when you get something and you ask yourself, "What can I do with this?" Like this mallet: I could hit the bowl, or when Than Lionel is swaying back and forth in meditation, I could hit him. All of that is fabrication. And then finally there's consciousness, which, as we discussed earlier today, is a process: It's our awareness of the six senses. Those are the five aggregates.

The question often comes up: Why did the Buddha, when analyzing the functions of the mind, focus on these five things? After all, he could have talked about other functions of the mind as well. Why does he focus on these? And it turns out that these are the functions associated with the way we eat. There's an interesting passage in the Canon where the Buddha says that once you take on the identity of a being, you have to feed. Feeding is what defines us, and these five activities surround the way we eat.

For example, form: You've got this body that you've got to nourish, and there are other material, physical things out there that you're going to feed on. Those are form. Feeling: First, there's the pain of hunger and then there's the satisfaction of

pleasure that comes when you've fed yourself well. Then perception: First, you want to perceive what kind of hunger you have—are you hungry for bread, are you hungry for water, are you hungry for cheese? Then you look out at the world out there to perceive: “Where are the objects that would assuage my hunger right now?” In fact, figuring out what we can eat, what we can perceive as edible, is the primary way in which we first engage with the world. When a baby crawls across the floor and finds something new, where does it go? Right in the mouth. That's how we first learn about the world: what's edible and what's not edible. And this is not just physical hunger that we're talking about here. There's also mental hunger—and mental feeding—as well. For example, we go through the world figuring out who is edible and who is not edible, emotionally. That's perception.

Fabrication: You try to figure out how to find something to eat. Once you find it, what do you do with it? If you have a potato, you can't just eat it whole. You have to do something with it. That's fabrication. It's the same with people as well. You find a person you're attracted to, but he or she is not quite perfect: “How can I change this person to be more to my liking?” That's fabrication. Finally, of course, there's consciousness, which is your awareness of all these processes. The Buddha says we cling to these activities because this is how we feed our way through the world.

So those are the aggregates.

Then there's clinging. It turns out that the word for clinging, *upādāna*, also means to feed as well, so basically there are two levels of feeding going on: feeding through the aggregates and feeding on the aggregates.

Clinging comes in four types. The first one is sensuality. Sensuality, remember, is not simply our desire for things outside. We're actually more attached to our fantasizing about the pleasures we can get from them, and the Buddha said that this is where we really cling. An example might be your desire for wine. You can think about wine for days, you can read magazines about wine, but when you actually drink the wine, how long does it take? Not that long. But then after you've drunk it, “It was a wonderful wine!” You can talk about that for another hour. That's sensuality.

The second way of clinging is that we cling to our habits and practices, which means being stuck on our habitual ways of doing things for no good reason. Have I told you the story about the goose? Do you want to hear it again? There was an Austrian biologist who raised a goose that gave birth to a gosling. The mother goose died, and so the gosling immediately fixated on the biologist. Everywhere the biologist went, the gosling followed him. This went on through the summer. Of course, the gosling grew into a goose. As winter was beginning to come, the biologist realized that he was going to have to bring the goose into the house. So one evening, at the time that he would usually feed the goose, he didn't feed it. He just walked into the house. The goose followed him into the house. Now, on the ground floor of the house, there was a hall that went to a window, and halfway down the hall

was a stairway that went up to the right, leading to where the biologist lived on the next floor up. So the biologist went up the stairway. However, the goose was freaked out by the fact that it was in the house. It saw the window and so went running for the window, thinking it could escape through it, but then it realized it couldn't get out that way. The biologist called to it, and so the goose turned around and went up the stairs.

Every day after that, when the goose went into the house, it would go first to the window and then back to go up the stairs. As time went on, the journey to the window got shorter and shorter until it finally got to the point where the goose would get to that side of the stairway, shake its leg at the window, and go up the stairs. But one night the biologist came home very late. The goose was very hungry, so when the biologist opened the door, the goose went running immediately up the stairs. Halfway up the stairs, though, it stopped and started shaking all over. Then, very deliberately, it went down the stairs, went over to the window, and then came up the stairs.

That's clinging to habits and practices: You're listening to your inner goose. That's the second form of clinging.

The third form of clinging is views. When you hold to a view regardless of whether it's good for you, simply because you believe you have to believe in it or that it makes you a better person than other people because you hold to it, that's clinging to views.

Then finally there's clinging to doctrines of the self. In other words, you define your self around the aggregates. You could define your self as being identical with the aggregates, or that you own the aggregates, or that you are in them, or that they are in you. Any way you define your self around these aggregates counts as a way of clinging to them.

If you cling to any of the aggregates in any of these four ways, that counts as a clinging-aggregate. For example, even if you have a sense of a cosmic self—in other words, you feel you have the body or any of the other aggregates inside you, while your sense of self is infinite, surrounding them—it still counts as a kind of clinging.

The Buddha's basic definition of these five clinging-aggregates is that they lie at the essence of suffering. They're the essence of the first noble truth. If, when you're suffering, you want to comprehend it, you have to figure out which aggregate you're clinging to, and which kind of clinging it is.

However, it turns out that as we're creating a state of concentration, we're also using the aggregates, and we're also using three out of the four kinds of clinging. In that way, we turn the clinging-aggregates from the first noble truth into the fourth.

How do the aggregates play a role in the state of concentration?

Form is the breath.

Feeling is the feeling-tone of comfort, pleasure, ease, or well-being you're trying to create by staying with the breath.

Perception is the mental label you hold in mind to keep yourself with the breath and also to make the concentration easier. For example, if you have a perception of the breath coming in and out only through the nose, it can make the breath more constricted. But if you think of the body being like a large sponge, and the breath can come in and out all the pores of your skin, that's going to change your sensation of the breathing. Similarly, if you think of the breath starting inside you—which is what the breath-energy does—instead of having to be pulled in from outside, that will lessen the tension around the breathing. That's perception.

As for fabrication, when you use directed thought and evaluation around the breath—focusing your thoughts on the breath, and trying to figure out which ways of breathing are easiest to stay with and provide the greatest sense of ease—that counts as an aggregate of fabrication.

And, of course, consciousness is aware of all of these things.

It's particularly important that you learn how to see these aggregates as component factors of your concentration because, after all, the five aggregates are related to feeding, and concentration is food for the path. When the Buddha compares the practice to being in a fortress—with mindfulness as the gatekeeper, with discernment as the wall around the fortress that's covered with plaster so that none of the outside soldiers can get in, with right effort as the soldiers, and your learning as the weapons—concentration is the food that feeds the soldiers and the gatekeeper to keep them strong. The sense of ease that you create within makes it easier to say No to pleasures outside.

Those are the aggregates in concentration practice.

As for the forms of clinging we use on the path, we don't use sensuality but we do develop and hold on to the habits of the precepts and to the practice of concentration: just sitting and focusing on the breath. It's a good form of clinging. As for views, we hold to right views about kamma and the four noble truths. And as for a doctrine of the self, we don't need to define ourselves very precisely, but we do need to develop a sense that we are capable of doing this and that it's going to be good for us to do it: the self as provider and the self as consumer.

So those are forms of clinging that actually help you stay on the path. As we said earlier, if you think of the path as being a raft going across the river, you hold to these habits and practices, you hold to these views, you hold to this sense of self as you're crossing the river, and that's what gets you across. When you get to the other side, you can let all these things go.

So these lists of teachings—the five hindrances, the seven factors for awakening, the six sense media, and the five clinging-aggregates—are some of the frames of

reference you can keep in mind as you try to learn how to master concentration, so that concentration is not just a random thing. It becomes a skill that you get more and more under your control.

That's mindfulness as a faculty. We'll continue to discuss concentration tomorrow, but right now, let's do it.

Q: I'm still not so clear about the fourth foundation of mindfulness, the dhammas. It's not the case that I like to stick to the lists—that doesn't help so much during the experience—but sometimes it's presented as the contents of the mind, mental phenomena. In that case, the third, the mind, would be the tone or the state of mind? In the other case, the fourth foundation consists of the things to contemplate as the four noble truths and so on. In that case, is it like a discursive meditation, investigation on the topic and how it applies to our lives?

A: As I was saying earlier, it's useful to think of the first three foundations of mindfulness or the first three frames of reference as one group, and the fourth as another group. The first three, basically, are the component factors of concentration. In other words, you have the breath, which is the body; the feelings, which are the feelings of pleasure you're trying to create and spread through the body; and then the mind, which is the awareness you're spreading throughout the body. You're trying to get all three of those to interpenetrate one another. The fourth frame of reference provides different frameworks that you can use to apply to the problem of trying to get the body, feelings, and mind together in such a way that the mind can settle down. These frameworks help you to remember what's unskillful and what's skillful so that when something comes up, you recognize it and know what to do with it.

For example, say that sensual desire comes up. You remember that it's not something that you just go into. You remember that it's one of the hindrances, and then the duty with regard to it is to watch it for a while, to understand it, and to counteract it with the purpose of eventually letting go of it. And so on with the other skillful and unskillful qualities of the different lists.

As for the framework of the six senses, this is a good frame of reference to use as you're going through the day. When you're looking at something or listening to something, ask yourself, "Am I creating a fetter for my mind around this and, if so, is there some way that I can let go of that fetter?" For example, you're walking down the street, you see somebody attractive, so you ask yourself, "Is there some other way that I can look at this person so that the sight of this person doesn't pull my mind away?"

That's how you use the fourth frame of reference to adjust the other three.

Questions of Action

April 28, 2017

There were a couple of answers that I gave to some questions yesterday that I was not totally satisfied with. So, I'd like another chance.

You probably know the story about Ajaan Chah in England. There are several versions of the story. The version I like is this: After a Dhamma talk, he asked if there were any questions. One woman said, Yes, she did have a question. It was a question she had asked of many teachers and had never gotten a satisfactory answer. The question was this: "After a person attains nibbāna, does that person still exist or not?" And Ajaan Chah said, "Well, this is a question that we don't usually answer, but I'll try to explain why." There was a candle burning right next to him, and he said to the woman, "Do you see the flame of the candle? As long as it's burning, we can talk about its color, its shape, its temperature. But then when we put it out"—and then he put out the flame of the candle with his fingers—"now can we talk about the shape and the color of the flame?"

She said, "No."

He said, "In the same way, after someone has attained nibbāna you can't really describe them." Then he asked her, "Does that answer satisfy you?"

She said, "No."

So he said, "Well, in that case, I'm not satisfied with your question."

That's not the case here. The questions you asked were perfectly fine. My answers were not satisfactory. So here's my second chance.

It's important to remember from the very beginning that we as Westerners, when coming to Buddhism, come with questions and understandings that are shaped by our culture. Because of our background, we think religion is all about what the universe is, who created the universe, what are we, and what is our place in the universe. And even if we're no longer Christian or Jewish or whatever, we still have many of these questions in the back of our mind. But in the case of Buddhism, though, those are not questions that the Buddha addressed. His main question was, "What are we doing that's creating suffering and how can we stop?" And so the questions here are not so much about what we are or where we are, they're about what we're doing.

When the Buddha first taught the Dhamma to his son, Rāhula, the initial lesson was all about action. You could actually say that this was how he taught mindfulness to his son. He told Rāhula, “Whenever you intend to do something”—and this could be in body, in speech, or in mind—“ask yourself, ‘What results do you expect from the action?’ If you anticipate any harm, either to yourself or to others, then don’t do it. If you don’t foresee any harm, you can go ahead and do it. If, while you’re doing the action, you see any harm coming from the action, then you stop. If you don’t see any harm, you can continue. When the action is done, then look at the long-term consequences. If you see that you did cause harm, go and talk it over with someone you trust on the path and see what advice you get from that person as to how not to repeat the mistake. Then, from that point on, resolve not to repeat that mistake. If you realize that you did not cause any harm, however, take joy in that fact and continue training.”

Notice that this is all about action, and it’s training in the three qualities we bring to mindfulness practice. You hold in mind the fact that you don’t want to cause any harm and you remember past mistakes so that you don’t repeat them. That’s mindfulness. Then you keep watching your actions and their results, as well as the intention behind them. That’s alertness. And then finally you try your best not to cause any harm and to continue developing in the training. That’s ardency.

This is all about your actions. The Buddha focuses on this issue in this passage not simply because he was teaching a child. The emphasis on actions is the central theme all the way through his teachings. He was preparing his son for all the higher teachings.

For instance, there’s another passage where he talks about how to develop your concentration, and he recommends the same sort of process. You look at the state of mind that you’ve developed and try to notice where there is still some disturbance in it. Then ask yourself, “What perception am I holding onto that’s causing that disturbance? Can I change that perception so that it has a less disturbing effect on the mind?” And if you find that there is something that you can change, then you do it. Then, as the mind settles down to a deeper level, let it stay there for a while and allow yourself to enjoy that state, at the same time noticing that it’s now empty of the disturbance that was there before. Then, when the mind is refreshed, you can ask yourself, “Is there still some disturbance here? What am I doing to cause that?” In this case, the action would be a perception, and the act of holding onto that perception. When you can drop the perception, you’ll move to a state of concentration even more empty of disturbance.

As you keep repeating this process, you develop your concentration deeper and deeper. At the same time, you’re gaining more and more insight into the workings of the mind.

So this is the theme you see running all the way through the Buddha’s teachings:

You try to be sensitive to what you're doing, trying to notice what you're doing that's creating unnecessary stress or disturbance, and then you drop that if you can. There's nothing in here about what the universe is, where the universe came from, what you are, what your consciousness came from, and where it's going. In other words, the questions the Buddha recommends asking are not about things. They're about actions.

This is one of the reasons why his vocabulary about actions is so precise. To us, it may sound like a lot of intellectualization, but it's precise with the purpose of making us more sensitive to what we're doing. It's like the vocabulary they teach to professional tasters. They're taught a vocabulary of very, very precise distinctions in smells and flavors, much subtler than ordinary people would use. The professional tasters all say that with that vocabulary, they become more and more sensitive to flavors and smells.

So when we hear the Buddha describing all these different actions in the mind, it's for us to start looking at our actions with more sensitivity as well. Because that's what the problem is. The problem is not who we are or where we are, it's what we're doing. In fact, our sense of who we are and where we are is an action itself. That's what they mean by the process of becoming. We create our sense of the world, we create our sense of who we are, and because of that, we suffer. If we can learn to look clearly and precisely at the action of creating our sense of who we are and where we are, then we can learn how to do it more skillfully to the point where we no longer have to suffer from that. This is why the Buddha would have you put aside questions of where we're coming from or where we are, or questions of our original awareness or the ground of our being. The focus is on, "What are you doing right now?"

For example, when you're in concentration or trying to get into concentration, it's good to be sensitive to what you're doing that's getting in the way of the concentration and ask yourself, "Can I simply stop doing that?" Sometimes you'll see that the actions getting in the way have to do with your idea of who you are or what the world is like. If you can drop those, the mind will calm down. Then, once the mind has calmed down, you find yourself at a particular level of concentration. Once you're able to settle there and enjoy it, you can ask yourself, "Is there still some disturbance here? What am I doing to cause that disturbance? Can I stop doing that?" In this way, as I said earlier, you deepen your concentration. No matter what level of concentration you're at, these are the basic questions you ask.

And, at the same time that you're developing your concentration, you're also developing your insight. The question sometimes comes up, "How much concentration do I need before I can do insight?" And the answer is, "Whatever level of concentration you have, you use that to notice, 'Where is there stress in the mind right now and what am I doing to cause it?'" If you can identify the cause and let go of it, you gain some insight. As your concentration deepens, the questions you ask

and the answers you come to will become more and more subtle, more and more profound, which means that the question of how much concentration you need in order to do insight should always be answered, “Whatever concentration you have now,” simply that the insight you gain will become more and more profound as the concentration deepens.

So the process of meditation is not simply one of getting the mind still. It also involves knowing which questions to put aside and which questions to ask. The questions that we’re used to—“What is the nature of the world? What is the nature of my self? What is my relationship to the world?”—are questions that the Buddha says to put aside.

Now, for many of us coming from the West, that doesn’t sound right, but it’s good to give the Buddha the benefit of the doubt: to learn his vocabulary for actions and to ask the questions he *does* have you ask about what you’re doing, what you can learn from what you’re doing, and how you can learn how to act more skillfully, so that you can actually act in a way that leads to the end of suffering.

And you do that step by step.

Q&A

Q: Concerning the hindrances to concentration, it seems that to drop an obstacle which obstructs the way for the mind to settle down, it is necessary to see it, understand it deeply, because the sañkhāra is rooted deeply in the mind, so that it seems insight is essential and so supports concentration. You cannot drop something you have not seen and understood. It comes in by another door, so it's not something you can just decide. It needs understanding and a lot of mettā to surrender and let go.

A: There are going to be levels of understanding as you try to get rid of the hindrances. To totally be beyond the hindrances requires that you do uproot them. But in order to get the mind to settle down, you need only a certain amount of understanding to clear them out of the way. They will come back eventually, but in the meantime, you've learned how to develop your powers of concentration a little bit further and deeper. It's like dealing with a difficult and powerful enemy. Before you can totally defeat the enemy, you have to gather your forces together. And so, all you have to do in the meantime is just keep the enemy at bay, and then when your forces are gathered, you can attack. This repeats the point I was making this morning, which is that you develop your concentration and your insight together. The deeper your concentration, the deeper your insight, and they will help each other along.

Q: I have the impression that mindfulness constitutes a dam or an obstacle for your thoughts. When there's this conscious presence, the mind is more and more serene. Is this right?

A: Getting the mind more serene requires all three qualities that we've been talking about, acting together. Mindfulness is what allows you to remember, "I should get out of this thought," alertness is alerting you to what the thought is actually doing, and ardency is what actually clears the thought away. Their acting together is what calms the mind down.

Q: Two questions. First: In the directed thought or *vitakka* and evaluation, the evaluation seems to be very near to the factor of investigation, which is the second factor of awakening in the seven factors for awakening. Is it the same thing and, if not, how is it different?

A: It is the same thing. The word for investigation of qualities is *dhammavicaya*, the “*vicaya*” being very close to *vicāra*, which is evaluation.

Q: Second question: When there is this examination of evaluation, investigation, it gives rise to a number of discursive thoughts that, if they persist in showing themselves, lead to the practice of *vipassanā*. In order to include them more, rather than re-establishing the mind back into concentration, the mind then returns to the concentration afterwards. There is this back-and-forth rhythm.

A: Yes, this is a rhythm that goes back and forth between the thinking and the stillness, but you have to be careful about those discursive thoughts so that they don’t discourse too far. Because the purpose of this thinking is to ask yourself, “How can I get the mind to settle down more?” If the thoughts go too far afield, then they’re defeating the purpose of your meditation.

Q: For the Gelugpas [a sect of Tibetan Buddhism], the mental *khandha* is divided into nine levels. The extreme level cannot be attained with a support that moves, such as the breath. The breath is only a preliminary phase easier to attain because the rhythm of the breathing permits you to return to the object without a lot of effort. After this phase, then one concentrates more on a single point, a fixed point, and with a mental image that is much more difficult but allows us to develop further the intensity of the concentration. Or else one can stay without the object of mental concentration and the mind is no longer occupied with concentrating on one thing and then one can be directly in contact with the mind. As for your technique, it is very interesting for getting a greater sense of the body to communicate with the different levels of tension within it, but it is not the object of Buddhism. What do you think?

A: When we’re working with the breath, we’re working in the first level of the nine concentration attainments. Theravāda has nine levels, too, and the first one is just getting the mind to settle down. As you get into the deeper levels, the breath grows calmer, and when you get to the fourth level, the breath stops. The breath energy still fills the body, but the sense of the in-and-out breathing has stopped. From that spot, you then go to a sense of space, from space you go to consciousness itself. Beyond that, you go to the state of nothingness, then a state of neither perception nor non-perception, and then the final level, where there’s no perception or feeling at all. So the work we’re doing here is to establish a foundation. Only when the foundation is solid can you build up on the other levels. We’ll talk more about this tonight.

Q: How do you explain mindfulness to children, and what analogies can you offer to them?

A: Remember that there are three aspects to mindfulness—mindfulness,

alertness, and ardency—and when you’re training your children, it’s good to train them in all three. Basically, mindfulness practice is a matter of stepping back and looking at yourself. The image the Buddha gives is of a mirror. Here, you can look at your actions: what you plan to do, what you’re doing, what you’ve done. And remind the child: “Take a couple of good long breaths before you decide what to do, especially if you’re feeling anger or fear. You want to step back, breathe through the body, and then ask yourself, ‘Do I really want to act on that emotion?’” Just that ability to take a little bit of space can make a lot of difference.

In addition to teaching mindfulness, there are three things you should teach children before they meditate, starting when they’re very young. One is gratitude for their parents and their teachers. The second is truthfulness. The third is respect.

And when you’re teaching mindfulness, also teach equanimity and patience. The various ajaans in Thailand noticed that their Western students lacked these two qualities in particular: equanimity and patience. You’ll notice, when you read some of the Westerners’ accounts of their time with their Thai ajaans, that the ajaans were teaching them almost as if they were teaching children, because in Thailand, patience and equanimity are taught to children when they’re very small. And so the ajaans had to back up and say, “We’ve got to start your education from the beginning.” The lack of equanimity and patience is a real problem in our culture because our culture doesn’t teach children to be patient. It teaches us to be more impatient, so we have to do something to counteract that tendency.

Q: Even though the technique is identical, is mindfulness the same when you are meditating in a hostile environment like the jungle or when you are in the secure comfort of a closed place?

A: There’s more of an edge when you’re practicing in the jungle. It’s more intense, there are more dangers, and as Ajaan Fuang would say, the teacher is stricter. While I’m sitting here, all I can do is just talk to you. I can’t hit you. But in the jungle, they bite. I can tell lots of stories about being with snakes, because snakes really do teach you good lessons.

For example, one thing that’s good to know when you’re in the jungle is that if you don’t move, snakes can’t see you. As far as they’re concerned, you’re a warm rock. Once I was meditating, sitting on a small board across a little ravine, only a few inches from the bottom of the ravine. When you’re meditating outside, you learn to interpret the sounds that you hear coming through the leaves and the grass. I thought I heard a snake sound, so I opened up my eyes and, sure enough, there was a cobra coming up the ravine. I realized I had to sit very, very still—because, as I said, the ajaans of the jungle are stricter over there. If I had moved, the snake wouldn’t have just criticized me. It would have bit me. So I stayed still, and it went right under me—and it was taking its time.

Another time, I was going into the bathroom. The bathrooms over there are just rooms with a toilet in the floor and with a little hole where the wall meets the floor for the bathing water to go out. I always knew that anything could come in and out of that little hole, so I was usually very careful to check when I went into the bathroom to see if anything had come in. But that day I was in a hurry. I opened the door and stepped on something soft, so immediately I jumped back. It was a cobra. Fortunately, the cobra had a little toad in its mouth, so first it had to spit out the toad before it turned to get me. In the meantime, I had gotten far away, and the toad was able to hop out the hole. So the toad and I saved each other's lives.

In short, being in the jungle means that you have to be very mindful all the time.

Concentration

Last night we talked about how the establishing of mindfulness, when it's developed, helps you to master right concentration. Tonight I'd like to talk about concentration in more detail. First, I'll read the passage from the Canon:

“What is the faculty of concentration? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, making his object to let go, attains concentration, attains singleness of mind. Quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful mental qualities, he enters and remains in the first jhāna: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. With the stilling of thoughts and evaluations, he enters and remains in the second jhāna: rapture and pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness, free from directed thought and evaluation, internal assurance. Then with the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, and alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters and remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous and mindful, one has a pleasant abiding.’ With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, as with the earlier disappearance of elation and distress, he enters and remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity and mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain.” [§1]

Two terms need to be explained here. One is singleness—in Pāli this is *ekaggatā*—and the other is *jhāna*.

The word *ekaggatā* can be broken down into three parts: *Eka* means one, *agga* can mean either summit or gathering place, and then the *-tā* at the end indicates that this is a noun. So you have either one summit or one gathering place for the mind. Sometimes *ekagga* is defined as being gathered into one point, with no ability to think, no awareness of your body or outside senses, but the Canon doesn't support that interpretation. When the Canon uses the word *ekagga* in the context of ordinary daily life, it's in the context of listening to a talk, saying that when you listen to a Dhamma talk, your mind should be *ekagga* while at the same time applying appropriate attention. In other words, you're thinking about how the talk applies to solving the problem of your own suffering. So when your mind is *ekagga*, it can think and it can hear.

Also, when you look at the descriptions of *jhāna* in the Canon, they talk about a whole-body experience, not an experience reduced to one point. And awakening is also based on *jhāna*. It's described as something that can happen when you're in a *jhāna* and you can analyze the *jhāna* in terms of fabrication or of the aggregates, and are able to develop dispassion for it. You wouldn't be able to do this if the mind wasn't able to think.

So the word *ekaggatā* or singleness means that all the activities of the mind are gathered around one object. In the first *jhāna*, for instance, you're thinking about the object and adjusting the object. As you get deeper into *jhāna*, then the thinking and evaluating fall away and the activities get more subtle.

Now, the word *jhāna* itself is related to a verb, *jhāyati*, which means to burn with a steady flame. They have different words for burning in Pāli, and this one is used to describe the flame of an oil lamp. When your mind is in *jhāna*, it's like a steady flame. If you're trying to read a book, you can read it by the flame of an oil lamp. If you were trying to read a book by a bonfire where the flames are jumping all over the place, though, you'd have trouble reading. In *jhāna*, you're trying to get the mind into steady focus so that you can read it clearly.

There are four levels of *jhāna*. The first level is basically what we've been doing this week—or, at least, what we're trying to do. At the very least, you're headed in the right direction. You're thinking about the breath and you're also evaluating the breath: Is it comfortable? Is it not comfortable? If it's not comfortable, what can you do to change? When it is comfortable, how do you maintain and use that sense of comfort? You try to spread it through the body. That's the work of directed thought and evaluation.

When you really do get focused on the breath, to the point where you're not interested in anything else, the mind will come to singleness of preoccupation. And the results will be a sense of ease or pleasure, along with a sense of rapture.

Those five factors, taken together—directed thought, evaluation, singleness of preoccupation, pleasure, and rapture—constitute the first *jhāna*.

As you're staying with the breath in this way, you find that you get to a point where you can't improve the breath any further. Ajaan Fuang's analogy is that you're trying to fill a water jar. There comes the point where the jar is full. You could keep on adding water, but it would spill out and the water in the jar would still stay at the same level, so it's useless to add water any more. So you stop the directed thought and evaluation. This is the point where the breath is really comfortable and the mind can enter into it. That's when you enter the second *jhāna*.

When you're in the first *jhāna*, it's as if the breath is in one area and you're in an area right next to it. In the second *jhāna*, though, it's as if the two of them meld together. This is unification of awareness, where the awareness and its object seem

to be one. You don't need to think about the breath anymore. You just have the perception that says "breath." Otherwise, you feel just very continuously there. You don't go anywhere else. There still is a sense of rapture and of pleasure. In fact, on this level, the pleasure and rapture grow stronger.

There will come a point, though, where the rapture begins to become unpleasant and you want to get away from it. The best analogy that I can think of is that it's like the radio waves coming through the chapel right now. You've got the radio waves coming from Monaco, the radio waves coming from Marseilles, Aix-en-Provence, and all the other radio stations around, and you have to decide which frequency you're going to tune into. Now suppose that Monaco is sending radio waves of hard rock, whereas Aix is sending soft classical music. You can think of rapture as being like the radio waves coming from Monaco, and they're getting kind of gross. You stay in the same place, but you change the frequency of your receiver, and now you're getting the soothing music coming in from Aix.

In the same way, when you're moving from the second to the third jhāna, you don't go anywhere else. You simply tune to a more refined frequency of awareness of the body, so that you can evade the grossness of the rapture. When you get into the third jhāna, the breath is very refined, the mind is very calm and even. The body feels pleasure; the mind feels a sense of equanimity.

As you stay there for a while, the breath energies in the body begin to connect more and more until you feel like everything is connected. There's very little sense that the breath is coming from outside, and all the breath you need is coming from inside. At that point, the breath gets more and more and more subtle until finally you don't feel any in-breath or out-breath at all. This is where you begin to enter the fourth jhāna.

Now, the first time you hit this, you might start getting scared: "Am I going to die from lack of breath?" And that thought pulls you out of concentration. You have to remind yourself that even though the breath is still, you're not forcing it to stay still. It's just that the body doesn't feel any need to breathe. The only way I can explain this is that the oxygen needs of the body are reduced as the mind gets more and more still, so that the oxygen exchange at your skin is enough.

Just as a side story here: There's a town in California, Laguna Beach, and once a year they have what they call a Festival of the Arts. They don't have real paintings there, so they depict famous paintings on stage: Gainsborough, Corot, whatever. Sometimes they try to reproduce sculptures using real people. For the sculptures, they go down to the beach to find people with nice bodies to be David or Venus, and then they paint them white to make them look like marble.

The first time they did this, they covered the people's bodies entirely in white, and then as the stage revolved around, David came into view and he fainted. They

discovered that this was because all the pores of his skin were covered with the white, so he was lacking oxygen.

So keep that in mind when the breath grows still. There is enough oxygen coming in through the skin. And then you can just stay there. The mind is very still. If there's any sense that some part of the body is lacking breath energy, the breath energy from another part of the body will come in and fill it up.

Now, based on this fourth jhāna, four formless jhānas can be accessed. We mentioned these briefly this afternoon. They're not necessary for the practice, but they're good to know, and very restful if you can manage them. To get into the first one, the dimension of the infinitude of space: You'll notice, as you're staying in the fourth jhāna, that because your in-breath and out-breath are not moving, your sense of the contours of your body begins to get very vague and fuzzy. Your sense of the body itself is like a mist with little tiny droplets of water. So, instead of focusing on the drops of sensation, you focus on the space in between. It's like the space in between atoms. Then you remain with the perception that this space fills and permeates everything: not only your own body, but everything in all directions. This is the first formless jhāna.

The second one, after you've learned to stay solidly with the sense of space, comes when you pose the question in your mind: "What is it that's aware of that space?" And there will be a perception of just "knowing, knowing, knowing," so you stick with that perception. In other words, whatever you're aware of, you're aware of the fact that there's awareness of that thing. The awareness itself is your focal point, and it seems that the awareness is not affected by anything. That's the second formless jhāna, the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness.

For the third formless jhāna, you drop the sense of the oneness of the mind, the oneness of the perception of awareness, and what's left is a perception of nothingness. That's the third formless jhāna, the dimension of nothingness.

If you stay with that long enough, even the perception of nothingness goes away, and you enter a state where there is no clear perception, but you couldn't say there is no perception at all: In other words, you recognize it, but you don't have a name for it. That's the fourth formless jhāna, the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception.

All of these are based on attaining the fourth jhāna where the breath is still.

Now, it's not necessary to attain all of these levels for the sake of awakening. According to the Canon, some people can reach awakening based just on the first jhāna. So don't get discouraged by the full map. However, it's good to know the map in advance, because sometimes people hit the dimension of space, consciousness, or nothingness, and they think, "Here I am; this must be nibbāna," but actually there is still fabrication going on there. After all, these states of concentration are all states of

becoming. As with every state of becoming, they're based on a desire—the desire to stay—supported by the intention to stay and to maximize the ease or stillness, along with attention to whatever needs to be done to protect that state. Now, these things are barely clear to your awareness when you're in those states, because they're working so well together. Your sense of “you”—as provider and consumer of the concentration—is also there, but it's very subtle. It seems to meld into its object, and nothing gets in the way of its desire to stay. When there's no opposition, the boundary of “self” gets very faint. But even though you barely notice your sense of self, it's still there, which is why all these states count as a state of becoming.

For our purposes now, though, let's focus on the four first jhānas. The Buddha gives analogies for each of these [§8]. The first jhāna, he says, is like a bathman working water into soap powder. In those days, they didn't use bars of soap. They used soap powder, and they would mix it together with water to make a kind of dough, like the dough you mix to make bread. In the Buddha's image, the bathman is working the water into the dough so that all of the powder is moistened and there's no excess water, no excess powder. The bathman mixing the powder and the water here stands for the activity of directed thought and evaluation as they take the sense of pleasure and rapture and work it through the body. That's the analogy for the first jhāna.

The second jhāna is like a lake with a spring of water at the base of the lake. There are no rivers coming into the lake, but rain falls regularly, which keeps the spring going, and the spring water wells up to fill the lake with its coolness. The water here stands for pleasure, while the welling up of the water, the movement of the water, stands for rapture. That's the analogy for the second jhāna.

In the third jhāna, he says, you have a lake of still water, because the rapture is gone. In this lake there are lotuses, and some of the lotuses have not come up above the surface of the water yet. They're immersed in the water and they're saturated from their roots to the tips of their buds with the cool water of the lake. That's the analogy for the third jhāna.

The fourth jhāna is like a man sitting covered by a white cloth, with no part of his body not covered with the white cloth.

Now you'll notice in these analogies that water is equivalent to pleasure, the movement of the water stands for rapture, and as I said earlier in the analogy for the first jhāna, the bathman stands for directed thought and evaluation. That's the only analogy in which you have a conscious agent doing something. Also, in the second analogy, the movement of the water is totally surrounded by the water of the lake, unlike the bathman who was a little bit separated from the water. In the same way, in the second jhāna there's a sense of total oneness, being surrounded by the breath. In the first jhāna, there's a sense that the breath is there and you're right here, behind it or to one side of it, but now the breath surrounds you. Your awareness is one with

the breath. In the analogy for the fourth jhāna, there's no water, and no movement: full equanimity.

So those are the analogies for the jhānas.

As the Buddha said, jhāna has four uses, and three of them are relevant here. The first is for a pleasant abiding, the second is for developing psychic powers, and the third is for mindfulness and alertness. The fourth use is for ending defilement, which is the goal of the path.

For the pleasant abiding, a lot has been written about the danger of getting stuck on the pleasure of jhāna, but the Buddha actually said it's a necessary part of the practice. Remember his image that it's food for the mind. It's also an alternative escape from pain. For most people, the only way you can escape from pain is through sensual pleasure, which is why we're caught going back and forth between pain and the desire for sensual pleasure all the time. To get out of that back-and-forth, you need the pleasure of jhāna as an alternative. That way, you don't have to go for the sensuality, which is a much more dangerous kind of pleasure. People don't kill, steal or wage war over jhāna, but they do over sensuality. And the pleasure of jhāna actually makes your virtue and discernment stronger. If you have a sense of internal well-being, it's easier to say No to sugary food, to say nothing of breaking the precepts. This pleasant abiding is also useful when you're suffering from an illness. In some cases, you hear about people who are able to cure an illness with their powers of concentration. And even if you can't cure your illness through concentration, you can live with it without suffering from it.

My teacher had many women students who were very good at concentration, but two in particular were good probably because both of them were suffering from cancer and they found concentration to be a good refuge for the mind. One of the two had a cancer that kept moving. First it was here, then it spread to there. In other words, she had it in one organ, they'd cut that out, and then it would move to another organ, and they would cut that out, and it would move to another organ. She lived like this for 20 years. I happened to visit her one day after she'd had a kidney removed, and she was sitting up in bed looking perfectly normal. I asked her, "Is there any pain?" And she said, "Yes, the pain is there, but I don't go into it." So, that's one of the benefits of having jhāna as a pleasant abiding.

The other woman had noticed a pain in her liver, and so the doctors did an exploratory operation, but they discovered that the cancer was far too advanced and too extensive for them to cut out. So they sewed her back up and asked her, "Would you like a pain-killer?" And she said, "No, I'd rather be alert." And as with the first woman, she showed no signs of being in pain. In fact, every morning the doctors and nurses in the hospital would come and visit her and listen to a Dhamma talk.

So, having jhāna as a pleasurable abiding is very helpful in many cases.

They talk about this in the Canon as well. There's a poem about a monk alone in the wilderness who falls ill. He asks himself, "Am I going to leave the wilderness and look for a doctor?" And he replies, "No, I'm going to think about the example of the Buddha and the great disciples. I'm going to treat my mind with concentration, with the four establishings of mindfulness, the five faculties, and the seven factors for awakening." He recovered and lived to tell the story. That's *jhāna* as a pleasant abiding.

As for psychic powers, everyone knows that these are dangerous, but if you use them wisely, they can help you develop *samvega*. Think of the Buddha remembering all of his past lives. This kind of knowledge can lead to a very strong sense of *samvega* or dismay over staying in *samsāra*. Ajaan Mun said he remembered that he was a dog for 500 lives. Imagine, if you could remember you'd been a dog for 500 lifetimes, the strong sense of *samvega* you'd feel.

It's interesting that, when the Canon talks about psychic powers, it treats them with a sense of humor. Perhaps this is because psychic power does have its dangers, so it's important that you not get dazzled by other people's psychic powers. You don't put too much faith in them—or develop pride around these powers if you develop them yourself.

One of my favorite stories in the Canon concerns a young monk with psychic powers. A group of monks are invited for a meal, a very large meal, and as they're walking back to the monastery, it's quite hot and—in the Canon's words—the monks feel like they're melting. So the youngest monk asks the eldest monk, "Wouldn't it be nice to have a gentle rain shower with a gentle breeze right now?" And the senior monk said, "Yes, that would be very nice." So all of a sudden, a breeze blows up, and a nice, gentle rain falls all the way back to the monastery. When they get there, the young monk asks, "Is that enough?" And the senior monk says, "Thank you. That was very kind of you."

Well, the layperson who had given the meal was following behind the monks and he saw this happen. So, after the monks had gone back to their huts, he confronted the youngest monk and said, "I saw that. Is there anything else you can do?" The young monk looked at him for a second and said, "Okay, take off your upper robe, place it on my porch, get a pile of grass, and put the pile of grass on the robe." The layperson did as he was told. The young monk went into his hut, closed the door, and then a flame came out through the cracks around the door, burned the grass, but didn't touch the cloth. The layperson picked up his robe and, with his hair standing on end, was shaking it off as the monk came out and asked him, "Is that enough?" And the layperson said, "Yes, more than enough, thank you." Then he went on to say, "You're welcome to stay here as long as you'd like. I'll provide whatever food, clothing, shelter, and medicine you need." So the monk said, "That's very nice of you to say that." But after the layperson left, the monk gathered all of his belongings and

left. He realized the trouble that would follow if word of this got out, so he decided that the best thing to do was to leave.

There's a very similar story in Ajaan Lee's life. There was an old nun who was living at home, paralyzed, and she had been paralyzed for many years. Ajaan Lee happened to be traveling through the area. Previously to that, another meditation monk had gone through the area, and the woman's children had asked him, "Can you cure our paralyzed mother?" And he said, "I can't do it, but another meditation monk is going to be coming soon and he'll be able to do it." So when Ajaan Lee happened to come through the area, the woman's children came to him and asked, "Can you please come and see our mother?" As he walked into the house, she got up from her bed just enough to put her hands in añjali, palm-to-palm in front of her face. And he said to her, "Okay, your old kamma is done, you can be cured now." The next thing he did was something I can imagine in a movie with Humphrey Bogart. He sat down near her and said, "Can you light my cigarette?" And she did. Within two weeks she was walking.

The problem, though, was that after he had cured her, everyone in the area came with all of their sick people, so he had to leave. Psychic powers are not always a good thing.

So, let's get back on topic. The third use of jhāna is to develop more mindfulness and alertness, because the stillness of jhāna makes it easier to remember things—that's the function of mindfulness—and it allows you to be alert to things in the mind more quickly and more subtly, which helps in the work of ardency. That way, if any disturbance comes into the mind, you can very quickly get rid of it. If anything good appears in the mind, you can start working on nurturing it right away. Often the good qualities of the mind are like tiny, tiny sprouts coming up out of the ground, and if you're not looking carefully, you just step on them. But if you learn to recognize them for what they are, then you can protect them. This is how jhāna helps with mindfulness and alertness.

As for putting an end to defilements—in other words, the real purpose of our practice—first, as you're getting the mind into concentration, you can see any distraction that comes up and recognize that "This is simply a fabrication," so you can realize that it's not the true you. It's just an old habit. All too often when a feeling comes up in the body, you think, "This is my feeling," and you think that if you don't fully express it or honor it, you're not being true to yourself. But if you have another place to put the mind, as in the state of concentration, you can see that these feelings and the thoughts around them are just old habits, and that you have the freedom to change them. In this way, you can let them go. This is the task of discernment that we'll discuss more tomorrow night.

As your jhāna itself becomes more fully mastered, you can start looking at the jhāna itself in terms of fabrication. Remember the three kinds of fabrication we

talked about when we were discussing persistence. There's bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath; verbal fabrication, which is directed thought and evaluation, in other words, the way the mind talks to itself; and then there's mental fabrication, which are feelings and perceptions. As I pointed out last night, every state of jhāna is composed of these things: all three in the case of the first jhāna; bodily and mental fabrication in the case of the second and third jhāna; and mental fabrication in the case of every level beginning with the fourth jhāna. Once the mind is really firmly in a state of concentration, you can pull out a little bit and analyze it in those terms. You can do this either while you're in the state of jhāna [§9] or as you move from one jhāna to another. For example, when you enter into the second jhāna, your verbal fabrication falls away. When you move into the fourth, then bodily fabrication falls away. When mental fabrication falls away, it's a state that goes even higher than the highest jhāna. In Ajaan Lee's image, it's like putting a rock into a smelter and raising the temperature, and as you reach the melting point of different minerals—tin, lead, zinc, silver, and gold—they separate out of the rock on their own.

So in either way—either when analyzing the jhāna while in it, or when you move from one to another—you begin to see clearly that these are fabricated states, and what precisely the fabrications are. As I said earlier, this is a very important insight because when you attain a state of pure awareness or luminous awareness, it's all too easy to mistake it for the unfabricated: when, for example, you think you've reached the ground of being, a metaphysical substrate that underlies your being or the being of the world. But when you keep in mind the fact that concentration is a type of kamma and fabrication, you keep looking to see, "What am I doing to maintain this state?" You see that your sense of being one with something—even space, consciousness, or nothingness—is a kind of doing. There's a perception behind it that's doing the activity. Keeping this in mind gives you a perspective to detect the subtle movements in the mind that still have a potential to cause suffering. This level of mindfulness is what protects you from mistaking a jhāna attainment for the highest attainment.

Here it's important to remember what Ajaan Lee said, which is that when you're practicing jhāna you're going against the principles of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. You're trying to see how far you can fabricate something that's constant and easeful and under your control. But you come to an end to that. This is how far fabrication can take you. Fabrication can only get this good. That realization puts you in a better position to be willing to let go of everything that is fabricated and to recognize the unfabricated when you actually encounter it.

So, those are the four uses of jhāna: The first three are a pleasant abiding, psychic powers, mindfulness and alertness—all of which are parts of the path—and then the fourth, the end of defilement, is the end of the path. Jhāna helps you reach the end of

the path because it puts you in a good position to develop discernment. Discernment is what actually gets you to the end of the path, but the concentration is what gives you the power and the precision so that discernment can clearly see subtle things. It's like doing a scientific experiment. You have all of your equipment on a table, and although the equipment may be very sensitive, if the table wobbles, then the results recorded by the equipment are useless. But if the table is solid, then you can trust what the equipment is telling you.

We'll talk about the work of discernment tomorrow night to show how this equipment actually works. But for now, let's meditate.

Vocabulary & Maps

April 29, 2017

This morning we'll have two short talks. You can meditate while I talk.

The first talk is actually a response to a question that was written yesterday. The question required a lot of thought, so I'm going to give the answer now. The question was, "How many kinds of awareness (*conscience*) are there?"

What we need here is a vocabulary lesson.

You start out with your basic awareness, the simple act of receiving sensory impressions. That's called *viññāṇa*, and in English we translate it as "consciousness."

Then there are perceptions, the labels by which you recognize things. In Pāli, that's *saññā*.

Then there's the act of attention, which in Pāli is *manasikāra*, and that's basically a matter of noticing what issues to look for and how to ask useful questions around them. The Buddha never talks about bare attention, but he does talk about the importance of *appropriate* attention: attention that actually asks the right questions.

Then there's equanimity, or *upekkhā*, which means being non-reactive. In other words, you're not going to let your emotions take over. This is based on the intention to remain non-reactive, to simply look on while something is happening.

Mindfulness, *sati*, is the act of remembering, of calling something to mind.

Then there's alertness, *sampajañña* in Pāli, and that has to do with being alert to what you're doing and the results you're getting right now.

I'll give you an example to explain these terms.

You're going to make a ratatouille.

First, just looking at the ingredients, simply the fact that you know they're there, would be *viññāṇa*.

Then you recognize the ingredients: You've got the tomatoes, the zucchini, the eggplants, and the garlic. You know what's what: That's *saññā*, or perception. The perception is the mental note that identifies them.

Mindfulness is what remembers how to make the ratatouille. It remembers not only the recipes you may have read, but also your past experiences of making

ratatouille.

Now, while you're making the ratatouille, you have to make sure that you don't get emotionally upset when something goes wrong: That's *upekkhā*. You maintain your cool so that you can correct for any mistakes in time.

Alertness, or *sampajañña*, is the act of watching yourself as you're cooking the ratatouille and looking at the results you're getting.

Attention—appropriate attention—is a matter of knowing that certain problems may come up—for example, there's the danger of overcooking or undercooking some of the vegetables—so you pay particular attention to make sure that doesn't happen.

Then, finally, discernment is when you figure out, if something is going wrong, what can you do to correct it. For example, you may notice that the ingredients you have are not precisely the same as the ingredients you had before. Say, the tomatoes are not precisely the same kind of tomatoes—maybe they're of a lower quality—and so the question is: What do you do to make adjustments? What do you do to compensate? And then, as you're putting the ratatouille together, you may remember that some people put olives in their ratatouille, and so you can ask yourself: Would olives be good today or not? As you exercise your judgment in a case like that, that's discernment.

Then you get to eat the ratatouille. First, there would be the consciousness of the taste. Perception would be able to identify the taste of the different ingredients, and finally discernment judges whether you did this well or not. Whatever lessons you learned from this ratatouille, you can then apply that to your next ratatouille: That's mindfulness.

That's the first talk.

The second talk has to do with the map of concentration I gave you last night. The question is: How do you use a map like that? You have to remember that, as with any map, you don't keep your nose stuck in the map all the time. You keep the map by your side and consult it only when really necessary. So when you're sitting here doing concentration, you're not focusing on the map. You're not even focusing on the idea of *jhāna*. You're focusing on the breath. The map is there for when you have problems settling down, to help you gain an idea of what you might be doing wrong—or forgetting to do. Or if something new comes up in the course of the meditation, then when you come out of meditation, you can consult the map for help in figuring out what it was.

When I was Ajaan Fuang's attendant when he was teaching in Bangkok, just watching him teach taught me a lot of lessons. When people would come to study with him, he would hand them a copy of Ajaan Lee's *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, Method 2, and say, "Read the first seven steps, and then we'll meditate."

Now, in that book, there's also an explanation of *jhāna*, but Ajaan Fuang very rarely mentioned the word. He would talk to people about their breath. He'd get them to describe how the breath felt to them, and then he'd use their vocabulary to give further instructions.

And he had a special talent. People would be sitting and meditating with him, and he could sense when something interesting or special or dangerous was happening in someone's meditation. He would ask them, "What are you doing right now?" Not only that, sometimes he would say, "Isn't this happening to you right now?" And they would say, "Yes," and then he would say, "Okay, now you do this."

Now, of course, everyone else in the room could hear and so we were learning lessons from one another's meditation in that way. On the one hand, the drawback of this was that it made people competitive. Don't think that only Westerners are competitive when they meditate. But on the other hand, it was encouraging to hear other people make progress. One thing that was interesting to notice was that his instructions would often be very different for different people until they finally all got to the point where the breath stopped. From that point on, the instructions were the same for everyone.

One of the lessons that I learned from that experience is that as we're trying to get the mind to settle down in the body, we each have very different problems as we relate to the energies in the body. This may have to do with our emotional history or just simply our sense of how we relate to our body to begin with. So in the very beginning, it's important not to try to make things fit too closely to the map. As with any map, such as a map of roads, there will be large white spaces between the roads. But if you actually took an aerial photo of the same area, you wouldn't see any white spaces at all. So be prepared for the possibility that things may come up in your meditation that are not on the map. They're in the white spaces between the roads.

It's also the case that different people will go through different stages as they settle down. Even in the Pāli Canon, some descriptions of concentration talk about four *jhānas* and some talk about five: In the five-*jhāna* descriptions, there's an intermediate level between the first and second *jhāna* that has a modicum of evaluation, but no directed thought. So it's good to have a rule of thumb: Whatever state you find yourself in, don't be too quick to label it. Your first question should be, "Can you stay there? Does it feel comfortable?" If it doesn't feel comfortable to stay there for long periods of time, drop it. If it is comfortable, try to stay there as long as you can. Don't be too quick to move on.

Then, once you're well-established there and you've gotten some nourishment from it, the next question is, "Is there still some stress in here?" Try to notice when the stress goes up, when the stress goes down. When it goes up, what did you do?—and "doing" here basically means, "What kind of perception did you have at that time?" Can you let go of that activity and still be quiet? If you can, the mind will go to

a deeper level of concentration. But if you find that you're losing your focus, go back to where you were before.

For example, when we do the survey of the body and I tell you to find one spot to settle down and then to be aware of the whole body: If you find that you lose your focus, that's a sign that you're not ready to settle down and you should go back to your survey. In this way, you begin to find out how quickly you should try to progress and you learn from your own discernment. It's in making yourself more sensitive like this: That's what real discernment comes from.

Now, there are a couple of types of wrong concentration you have to watch out for. The first one is when you're settling down with the breath, things get very comfortable, so comfortable that you drop the breath and just go for the comfort. You stay there—it can seem like you're floating in mid-air—and you begin to lose sense of where you are. All you know is that it's still and comfortable. When you come out, you sometimes ask yourself, "Was I asleep or was I awake?" You're not sure. This is called delusion concentration. If you find yourself in this state, one of the outside signs may be that the body is swaying back and forth, but that's not always the case. Sometimes you do sit very still. Now, if you find yourself having a tendency to get into this state, then as soon as the breath is comfortable, try to spread your awareness so that it fills the whole body and put special effort into trying to maintain that full-body awareness. The other way to avoid this is to keep moving your point of focus—three breaths in one spot, three breaths in another, and so on. In other words, give the mind some work to do.

That's the first kind of wrong concentration you want to avoid.

The second one is when you put yourself into a trance. You're so focused that the mind begins to feel like it's frozen in place. What's happening is that you're putting too much control on things. If you find this happening, you have to back up and just let the breath flow naturally, and that will allow things to go back more to normal. That's the second type of wrong concentration.

The third kind is called the state of non-perception. This comes when your concentration is getting stronger and you get to the point where any thought or perception that comes up in mind, you just toss it out, toss it out, toss it out. You basically forbid the mind to think or label anything at all, and it goes into a state where you lose all sense of your body and of the world around you. There's just a little bit of awareness left, enough so that you know you're not asleep, but there are no thoughts or perceptions at all in there. One of the strange features of this kind of concentration is that if you make up your mind that you want to leave at a particular time, the mind will leave precisely at that time. You can sit for many hours and it feels like just a minute or two.

Now this is wrong concentration because you can't use it as a basis for

discernment. It does have its uses, though. For example, when I first found myself falling into this—and I can talk about it because it's wrong concentration—I waited until I'd fallen into it twice before telling Ajaan Fuang. He had a rule of thumb: If something had happened in your meditation, he didn't want to hear about it until it had happened at least twice. So after the second time, I told him about it, and he asked, "Do you like it?" I said, "Part of me liked it, but I felt kind of dizzy when I came out." And he said, "It's good that you don't like it because some people think that it's nibbāna. But," he added, "it does have its uses." One time he had to go in for an operation. They were going to remove a kidney, and he didn't trust the anesthesiologist, so he put himself into this state. He had asked the doctors, "How soon do you expect the operation to be over?" And so he willed himself to come out after that point. When he was coming out, he found that he was being wheeled back into the operating room. They explained that they had sewn him up wrong, so they were going to have to do it again. So he put himself back in.

And even though I told him I liked it a little bit, I actually found that I liked it a lot, especially as I was meditating at Wat Asokaram. They have a rotating roster there for the monks who give Dhamma talks in the evening or, occasionally, in the afternoon, and they would go through the roster once every two weeks. There were about 16 monks on the roster, and only two or three of them could give good Dhamma talks. The others gave very poor, boring ones. And so going into this state had its use: I didn't have to hear boring Dhamma talks.

The problem was that I got so that I couldn't listen to any Dhamma talks at all. In fact, one time someone came to Wat Dhammasathit and brought along a tape of Luang Paw Phut, who was just becoming famous at that time. He was very articulate, gave very good Dhamma talks, and so the person said that I had to listen to this Dhamma talk. I sat down and the next thing I knew was the sound of the tape recorder turning off. The person exclaimed, "Wasn't that a great Dhamma talk?" and I said, "I don't know, I didn't hear it."

The way I got unstuck from this was one time I was back at Wat Asokaram, and a visiting ajaan gave the talk one evening. At the very beginning of the talk, just as I was getting ready to get into concentration, the first thing he said was, "People who are stuck on the state of non-perception..." I was all ears. He said, "It's very pleasant to be there, but there's no discernment, and if you die in that state, you become a brahmā of non-perception, but then when you're reborn from that state, you're going to be *bum bum, burr burr*," which means totally bonkers. Crazy. So from that point on, I couldn't get back into that state anymore.

So those are three kinds of wrong concentration you have to watch out for.

One point that I forgot to mention just now is that when you're trying to settle down and get the breath energies right, you may find that some parts of the body won't cooperate. They will just stay tight. In fact, the more you try to loosen them up,

the more they'll tighten up. Now, don't think that you can't settle down while they're there. You just settle down someplace else in the body. Remember Ajaan Lee's image, which is that you're going into a house where some of the floorboards are rotten. You don't lie down on the rotten spots. You stay on the spots that are still good. In the meantime, you treat the rotten spots—the tight bundles of tension—with a lot of gentleness. It's almost like dealing with a wild animal. If you stare right at the animal, the animal will feel threatened, and if it doesn't run away, it will attack you. But if you pretend that you don't notice the animal and just look other places, the animal will feel more secure.

It's as if this part of this body doesn't trust you because you've probably pushed a lot of tension into that spot, and it doesn't feel confident that you'll treat it with enough gentleness. But if you show that you treat the rest of the body with gentleness, gradually it will open up. When it opens up, it's as if something frozen inside of you suddenly melts. Sometimes a memory of a very strong emotional event will occur at the same time. You realize you've been carrying that issue around, but now you can let it go. In that way, you can inhabit the body more fully.

The important part of all of this is that you're going to try to develop your own sensitivity. The map is there to give you some pointers. But as for when to stay in a particular state and when to move on, you have to learn by trial and error. And it's through learning from trial and error that your sensitivity develops. And through the sensitivity, your discernment becomes stronger. It's in this way that concentration practice leads to more discernment.

Q&A

Q: In meditation, sometimes you can be aware of each in-breath and each out-breath, and at the same time have thoughts that arrive and also commentaries on the thoughts. Does this correspond to different levels or types of awareness?

A: It's good to think of this in terms of the image of the committee inside the mind. There are lots of different desires that haven't yet gotten in line with the meditation, or they may be just old habits of the mind churning out thoughts. This is when it's good to think of that technique of just ignoring the thoughts. Think of them as like a stray dog that's coming around your house. If you feed it, it'll keep coming back. If you don't feed it, it goes away. It may whine a bit at first, but if you're persistent in ignoring it, it'll eventually go away. By paying attention to the thoughts, you're feeding them, so just don't pay them any attention.

Q: Is it the case that you are at a certain level of jhāna for a few moments or minutes, and then, because it's not maintained, you're again where you were before, which, if it is the case, means that you can taste even very briefly higher states of mind?

A: It is possible to reach the different states of jhāna for very brief moments, and sometimes when you attain them for a longer period of time, you realize, "I've experienced this before, if only briefly." Sometimes, like the Buddha, you may think of a time when you were a child and your mind happened to be peaceful on its own. What we're doing here, as we're practicing the jhānas, is that we're learning how to bring these experiences more under control so that we can then observe them more clearly. It's only when we're with them for a long period of time that we can understand how they're fabricated. Otherwise, the peace seems like a bolt out of the blue: You don't know where it's coming from, and so you can't understand it very well. It's just very impressive, and it's very easy to misinterpret what it is. So basically what we're trying to do is learn how to be more intimately acquainted with the higher states of the mind.

Q: In certain teachings, it's said that in the first jhāna the five senses are closed. This would correspond to what you said this morning was wrong concentration. So what is it?

A: The Canon is very clear on the point that the senses don't have to close down in the four jhānas. However, it does describe states of right concentration where the five senses do close down, but those are the formless states, and even then it's not necessarily the case that the senses close down. The difference between those states and the state of non-perception is that when you're in them, you are very clearly aware of what your perception is, either the sense of space or the sense of knowing, consciousness, or the perception of nothingness. Even the state of neither perception nor non-perception is not totally devoid of perception. What I was talking about this morning has no perception at all. It's just a blanking out.

Q: For Westerners, equanimity is often given a bad rap. It's seen as kind of a sense of futility, a passive attitude, indifference, or even a weakness. Is this true? Can you give us some examples that would show that there is actually a noble, better understanding of this noble faculty?

A: Equanimity is basically accepting things that you realize you cannot change. And the reason why we have to accept them is because if we don't, we waste a lot of energy trying to change things that we can't. If you do develop equanimity toward those things, though, then you have the energy to change the things that you can.

For example, suppose that someone in your family has a serious illness. You have to accept that fact with equanimity, and then from there you try to see what you can do to help. The acceptance is what allows you to think clearly. If you're upset or disturbed by the illness, sometimes you actually make the condition worse. So, we're not talking about a general indifference to everything; we're being more selective, knowing when to be equanimous and when to be more proactive. But you do have to develop the strength and ability to be equanimous about anything at all. For example, suppose the doctor gives you a diagnosis that you have three months left to live. The more time you spend being upset about that, the less time you have to live your last three months well. But if you can tell yourself, "This is part of being a human being. This happens to other human beings, so why can't it happen to me?" then you can see, "What can I do for the next three months to get the most use out of them?" In this way, equanimity is not a foundation for non-action. It's a basis for learning how to act wisely.

Q: How can *upekkhā*—which I've seen explained as a regularity of the mind—exist with the other three sublime abidings?

A: As I said earlier, the important point is learning how to use which attitude at the right time. If all you can think about is how much you want other people to be happy, and yet they refuse to act on the causes of happiness, you're going to suffer. When you realize that other beings have the freedom to act on their own, then when you realize that their actions are beyond your control, you can focus on what you can

control.

Q: Several years ago I took a retreat with a monk who claimed to be a forest monk. He said that he had paranormal, supernatural powers, and was able to know what people were thinking or what they were doing all the time. And he was able to track people down for a long time, thanks to his powers, even after they had died. I must admit that I felt a little afraid. What do you think? Is this kind of thing true?

A: Stay away. I would not trust any monk who makes claims about his powers. Part of the etiquette of actually having the powers and using them wisely is that you don't talk about them.

Now, you have to wonder what this monk's motivation was for telling you this. We do have biographies of the ajaans that describe the different powers they developed, but you have to understand—even in the case of Ajaan Mun, where there are lots of stories about his visions and things—that he would talk about them only with his students who were actually having the same experiences. He wouldn't talk about them to anyone else. The reason he divulged them was for the sake of giving instruction in how to use the power properly. Beyond that, no one has any business talking about powers. And again, as I said at the very beginning, if people do make claims like this, stay away from them.

Q: Ajaan Mun has given evidence of contact with devas on many levels of spiritual development as well as the grand disciples of the Buddha. Is this a frequent phenomenon among the grand masters of Buddhism?

A: There are some arahants who have experiences of that sort, and there are others who don't, but they're still arahants. So it's not a necessary part of the attainment. And it's important to realize that Ajaan Mun, for example, had a particular rule of thumb: If he had a vision, no matter who it looked like it was coming from, he would ask himself, "What is the Dhamma lesson that can be learned from this vision? Does it fit in with what you already know of the Dhamma?" If it seemed to fit in with the Dhamma, he would put it to the test to see if it really did give good results. Only after testing it would he come to a conclusion about it.

So, the important point about a lesson is not who or where it comes from. It's whether it actually works or not. In other words, you don't trust everything you see. After all, even if it is an actual deva, there are many cases of ignorant devas. One of my favorite accounts about devas in the Canon is where a young monk is bathing in the river, and as he comes out and is drying himself, a female deva comes down from a tree and says, "Why are you wasting your time as a monk? Why don't you enjoy sensuality and then become a monk when you're old?" Which means that you can't trust devas.

Q: In passing, you made a mocking remark about the publication of a recent neuroscience article showing the objective results of the effect of respiration through the nose on cerebral function. First question: Do you prefer cooking?

A: Sometimes cooking gives more reliable results than science. When you read a scientific article, you don't really know how well the experiment was conducted. But with cooking, all you need to do is taste the results and you can judge for yourself whether it's good.

Q: Second question: Don't you think that science is a powerful and a formidable boost for inciting Westerners to practice, basically because they've proven something about the path?

A: Science is an unreliable friend. There are many cases where people do begin to come to meditation because of scientific articles, but there's the question of which articles you can really trust. In America, the National Institute of Health, a government agency, gave a lot of grants for mindfulness experiments, and then after several years, they had someone do an analysis of the experiments that had been conducted using the grant money. The conclusion was that the experiments were all very poorly designed, the concept of mindfulness was too vague, and so the results were worthless.

Some experiments actually give the wrong impression of meditation. There are articles claiming that experiments have proven, for example, that mindfulness is really good for making soldiers more efficient killers. And I read recently of another experiment claiming that mindfulness is good for women but not so much for men. So what do you do with information like that?

Also, and most importantly, there is an awful lot that goes on in the meditation that cannot be measured physically. Awakening, for instance, doesn't have any effect on the body, so it can't be measured externally. So as I said, science can be sometimes a friend, but sometimes not a friend, so we have to treat it with care.

The other point that I want to make: I have some friends who teach vipassanā in America and they've said that people who come after reading scientific articles will often say, "We want to learn the technique, but don't tell us anything about inconstancy, stress, and not-self. We don't want to hear it."

So, watch out for science.

Discernment

Discernment. For the past four nights, we've been talking about the three intention faculties: persistence, mindfulness, and concentration. We call them the intention faculties because they are things that you're trying to do and trying to create. They do incorporate some aspects of attention as well, and they build on conviction and discernment, but their primary emphasis is intention: what you're trying to do.

Tonight, we'll return more directly to an attention faculty: discernment. Its focus is more on what you're trying to know: what to pay attention to, and how to pay attention to it. This faculty is expressed in terms of the four noble truths. The Canon describes it in these terms:

“And what is the faculty of discernment? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, is discerning, endowed with discernment of arising & passing away—noble, penetrating, leading to the right ending of stress. He discerns, as it has come to be: ‘This is stress... This is the origination of stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.’ This is called the faculty of discernment.” [S1]

This faculty builds on conviction and it takes inspiration from the Buddha's awakening, and particularly, the third knowledge of that awakening, when he was able to reach the deathless by focusing on the problem of suffering.

When, in the very beginning, we use the four noble truths as tools to focus on our own suffering, it's done out of faith that we'll get worthwhile results. This requires faith for two main reasons.

The first is that the promised results—a deathless happiness—lie beyond our current experience, raising the standard of how good a potential happiness can be. Some people take umbrage at the idea of a deathless happiness because it seems to imply that they've been contenting themselves with second-rate happiness; other people like the idea, because it points to a happiness that could be truly satisfying. It takes wisdom and discernment not to get offended at the idea of a deathless happiness, but even so, in the beginning it has to be taken on faith.

The second reason why the four noble truths have to be taken on faith is because their analysis of suffering is counterintuitive. In the Buddha's analysis, we suffer in

feeding on our sense of what we are and how we can get what we want. Both of these things—our sense of what we are and how we can get what we want—constitute our basic strategies for happiness. Feeding is innate to our sense of what it means to be a being. And yet here the Buddha is telling us that we're suffering because of these things: our strategies for happiness and the activity that sustains us. This is why the Buddha's analysis goes against the grain, and why our resistance to it can be hard to uproot.

But concentration has put us in a better position to take advantage of this analysis by changing our feeding habits. It's like learning how to eat health food after eating junk food for a long time. It takes a while to get used to health food, but once you've grown used to it, you don't want to go back to junk food anymore. As we see that the Buddha's approach helps lessen our level of suffering, we begin to get an inkling that maybe he was right. This inkling, though, is not really confirmed until the first taste of awakening.

So what are the four noble truths? They're not just four interesting facts about suffering. They're a way of dividing our experience into four categories, so as to recognize what to do with events in each category for the purpose of gaining release. The four noble truths are also a value judgment, asserting that the problem of suffering you cause yourself is the most important problem to solve. Once this problem is solved, nothing else is a true problem for the mind.

The first truth is stress and suffering, the second one is the origination of suffering, the third is the cessation of suffering, and the fourth is the path of practice leading to the cessation of suffering. When you look at the four noble truths and the fact that the Buddha is taking suffering as the main problem you should focus your attention on trying to solve, you also see the role that intention plays in formulating these truths. They're based on goodwill for yourself and others. If the Buddha didn't have goodwill for everyone, he wouldn't have spent time focusing on this topic. As for us, the desire to solve the problem of the suffering we cause ourselves is, of course, based on goodwill for ourselves, but it's also based on goodwill for others: The less suffering we cause ourselves, the less of a burden we'll be on the people around us.

So let's look at the four truths in detail.

First, suffering and stress: The Buddha never said that life is suffering. He said something more specific and infinitely more useful about suffering. He started out by listing different examples of suffering: the suffering of birth, aging, illness, and death; sorrow, lamentation, despair; the suffering of not getting what you want, the suffering of having to be with what you don't like, and the suffering of being separated from what you do like. Then he summarized all of these kinds of suffering under the five clinging-aggregates: form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness, grasped at through any of the four kinds of clinging. Each of these is

an activity. And as we mentioned the other night, they all play a role in feeding.

The aggregates are not the Buddha's definition of what you are. Instead, they're the raw material from which you create your sense of who or what you are.

Remember also that clinging, too, is an activity—and it's also a type of feeding. So we have a double layer of feeding here. Now, each aggregate is composed of a potential that comes from the past and the act of actualizing that potential in the present moment. And we actualize the aggregates in anticipation of the pleasure we'll get out of them. So there are three layers of activity in each aggregate, and we cling to all three: to the potentials coming from the past, to the actualizing of that potential, and to the results we anticipate as we actualize them.

We've been using cooking as an analogy throughout these talks, so let's use the analogy here: The three levels of clinging are like clinging, one, to the ingredients that you're going to prepare, and then, two, to the way you prepare them. For example, this morning, when I mentioned putting olives in ratatouille, I saw a shiver of revulsion go through the room, with some people saying, "No, no! That's heresy." That's the second level of clinging: to the way you actualize ratatouille. And then the third level is clinging to your anticipation of how good the ratatouille is going to be.

Clinging gets bad when you keep repeating an activity in anticipation of getting good results even when it's not giving good results. This is a problem of poor judgment. You may have heard the story of the wise man who was eating a bushel of hot peppers and crying from the pain. People asked him, "Why are you eating the peppers?" "I'm looking for the sweet one." He was teaching a lesson about bad judgment. And for most of us, bad judgment is the way we live our lives.

I'll give you an example from America. On the highway to Las Vegas, there are signs by the side of the road, advertising the various casinos, and they say, "Guaranteed 93% payback rate!" Now what are they saying? They're saying, "You give us a dollar and we'll give you back 93 cents." And yet people still go in droves. While we're on the topic of Las Vegas—and the reason I know about Las Vegas is because when I go camping in Zion National Park or the Grand Canyon, I have to pass through Las Vegas on the way—my favorite sign on the road there says: "Las Vegas: Seven deadly sins, one convenient location." Again, people see this sign and they still go.

I read of a positive psychologist, one who studies how people become happy, and he was noticing that the people he was studying had very bad judgment about how they found happiness. They would tell him that something made them really happy, but if he actually talked to them while they were engaged in the activity, he'd find that they were not really that happy at all. He kept thinking, "Why are people so stupid?" But then he thought about himself. He liked climbing mountains, but when he was honest with himself, he realized that while he was actually climbing mountains, he was miserable. It was only after or before climbing that he liked it. So it's a common

trait: We're poor judges of what really makes us happy.

To get past this poor judgment, we don't stop judging. We have to develop better powers of judgment as to what's worth doing or not. For example, the Buddha says that not only do we feed on the aggregates, but the aggregates also chew on us—and we don't see the connection. I'll give you an analogy. It's like feeding chickens because we want to eat their eggs. But we have two problems. One is that we eat everything that comes out of the chickens, not just the eggs. That's the first problem. The second problem is that these are chickens from hell. At night, they come and peck at our eyes and our ears and our brain and our heart, and yet we don't make the connection: The more we feed them, the more they'll have the strength to peck at us.

Insight and discernment are basically going to teach us how to see the connection and how to put a stop to it. To begin with, they teach us to eat only the good things, i.e., the eggs, that come out of the chickens—the eggs, here, standing for the practice of concentration. But eventually, insight and discernment will bring us to a point where we won't have to feed on anything at all. That way we can stop feeding the chickens, and they won't peck at us any more.

This means that we have to stop clinging, ultimately, even to good things. As the Buddha said, suffering is in the clinging. It's not the case that we suffer only because we cling to impermanent and inconstant things. Even when we cling to the deathless, there's going to be stress. So simply being in the position where you have to feed, even if it's on good chicken eggs or on something better than eggs, you're still in a position of weakness because there's the tension in trying to hold on.

That's the first noble truth.

The second noble truth deals with the cause of suffering, craving, which comes in three types: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. Now, it's not the case that all desire is bad for the purpose of release. Some desire does play a role in the path, as we saw when we were discussing the faculty of persistence. The desire we have to overcome is contained in these three types of craving. They are the cause of suffering that you have to focus on abandoning.

Under craving for sensuality, remember that sensuality is basically our fascination with thinking about and planning sensual pleasures. Craving for becoming means wanting to take on an identity in a particular world of experience. What's interesting is that craving for non-becoming also leads to more suffering, because as you try to destroy a state of becoming, you take on a new identity as the destroyer or as the person who will benefit from the destruction.

This means that if you want to put an end to suffering, you have to think strategically. In other words, you can't just destroy becoming, because the act of destroying creates new becoming. Instead, you have to stop feeding the causes of

becoming, and then becoming will end on its own. The way you do that is by developing dispassion, which is the third noble truth: the cessation of suffering through dispassion for craving. And then the fourth noble truth is the path to dispassion, which consists of virtue, concentration, and discernment.

Each of these truths carries a duty. The duty with regard to suffering is to comprehend it. Comprehension means understanding the five clinging-aggregates to the point of dispassion.

The duty with regard to craving is to abandon it.

The duty with regard to cessation is to realize it. There are many times when we let go of craving but we're not really aware of what we're doing, because we let go of one craving just to hold onto another one. So, to realize cessation means noticing that when you let go of craving, there really is a lessening of suffering.

The duty with regard to the path is to develop it.

Now, the Buddha's not imposing these duties on you. Simply that if you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you've got to do.

And notice that the first three duties revolve around dispassion: You comprehend suffering to the point of dispassion, you abandon craving through developing dispassion for it, and suffering ceases because of dispassion. However, the duty with regard to the fourth noble truth—developing it—requires a certain amount of passion. You need to be passionate about virtue, concentration, and discernment in order for them to grow. At the same time, you still need to feed in the course of the practice. You can't just say, "Oh, the food and the stomach, they're impermanent, so I'll just stop eating." It doesn't work that way. You have to strengthen the mind first so that it's in a position where it no longer needs to feed—and this is what we do as we practice the path. We develop the five strengths so that they become five faculties. When concentration is in charge of the mind—i.e., when it becomes a faculty—it provides us with alternative food. And when the other faculties are in charge, they change our relationship to feeding entirely.

Now as I mentioned the other night, the path, too, is made out of aggregates, which, after you've fully developed the path and it has done its work, you'll eventually have to let go. In other words, at first you're passionate about developing the path, but when it's developed, you have to grow dispassionate toward it. This is why the practice of the path has to be strategic and why it occurs in stages. Remember the story of Ajaan Chah and the banana: You hold onto the peel until it's time to eat the banana. Only then do you let it go. It's the same with the path. You hold onto it until it's performed its duty. Only then do you develop dispassion for it, too, and let it go.

Now with every activity we do, we have to make a value judgment. The question is: Is this worth doing? Only when we develop dispassion for our activities can we stop doing them, and these are the steps in how that's done: You look at your various

activities and ask yourself, “Is this worth doing?” To answer this question, the Buddha has you analyze each activity in five steps so that you can make that judgment wisely [§10]. First, you look at the origination of whatever it is: When it comes, what sparks it? Second, when it passes away, what passes away with it? Third, what’s the allure of this activity? Fourth, what are its drawbacks? And then fifth, when you compare the allure with the drawbacks and you see that the drawbacks are much heavier, then you find the escape, which is dispassion.

To apply this analysis to the analogy of the chickens: We cling, one, to the chickens and to whatever comes out of the chickens; two, to our habitual ways of taking whatever comes out of the chickens and turning it into food; and three, to our anticipation of the enjoyment we’ll get out of eating the food. All too often, our attachment to the anticipation blinds us to the fact that, in clinging to the raw material, we’re clinging to chicken droppings. So the five steps help us to sort these things out. The first step is to see, when the raw material for our food first appears, that although sometimes it starts with eggs, sometimes it actually starts with chicken droppings. The second step is to see that even the good food, from the eggs, doesn’t last. The third step is to see how our anticipations talk us into finding even the chicken droppings alluring. The fourth step is to see that some of the food—from the droppings—actually makes us sick, and that even when we make good food from the eggs, our attachment to the chickens puts us in a position where they can peck our eyes out. When we see all this, we feel dispassion for everything connected with chickens, and that’s when we let go.

To apply the five steps to an actual problem in life, think of the example of anger: First, you want to see, when it comes, how is it coming and what’s sparking it?—because all too often we don’t see that point. We tend to be aware of our anger only when it’s strong. But if you really want to understand it, you have to see what sparks it to begin with. That will allow you to see that, all too often, the spark can be very minor. Then you look for the moments when the anger falls away. When it seems to last, you have to ask, is it really lasting? Are there moments when it passes away? Too often what happens is that anger comes, and the hormones start getting churned up in your body. The thoughts of anger go away for a moment, yet you’ll notice that the physical symptoms of the anger are still in the body and so you tell yourself, “I must still be angry,” and so you dig it up again. But by looking for the origination and passing away of the actual thought of anger, you’ll see that it’s more arbitrary and less monolithic than you may have thought. That begins to cut it down to a size where you feel that you can manage it.

Then you look for the allure of the anger: Why do you like it? Often we deny the fact that we like our anger. But until you admit that you like the anger—or at least one of the members of your committee likes the anger—you won’t be able to let it go. You can see the drawbacks again and again and again, but if you don’t see the

allure, you're not going to be able to make an effective comparison. When you do see the actual allure—what you really find compelling about anger, and this may occur on many levels—that's when you can compare it with the drawbacks. And then, when you see that the pain of the drawbacks outweighs the pleasure of the allure, that's when you develop dispassion for it. That's the escape.

This is where the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self come in. They're tools for developing dispassion. They're often called the three characteristics, but the Buddha never called them that. They are not necessarily the only characteristics of things in our experience—after all, the Buddha did admit that the aggregates have their pleasant side—but they are the aspects of the aggregates that you should focus on if you want to develop dispassion. They help you develop dispassion by focusing on the drawbacks of the things you're attracted to, the things that are the objects of your clinging, and the act of clinging itself within the mind.

The first perception is the perception of inconstancy. This is sometimes translated as “impermanence,” but I prefer the translation “inconstancy” for two main reasons. One, the Pāli term here, *anicca*, is the opposite of *nicca*, which in normal contexts means “constant.” Two, psychologically, the fact that something is impermanent doesn't necessarily make it a cause of suffering, but if something is inconstant, then there's a constant sense of stress around it. For example, you might build a house on a mountain, and you know the mountain's impermanent, but you tell yourself, “It's going to be permanent enough for me. By the time the mountain moves, I'm going to be long gone.” So it's not necessarily stressful. But if you build a house in an area where they have frequent earthquakes or fires or the ground is very unstable, the inconstancy of the situation makes it stressful. So that's the first perception.

The second perception is the perception of *dukkha*—stress or suffering. As I mentioned the other night, I prefer “stress” as a translation because it helps to de-romanticize the problem of suffering.

And then finally, the perception of *anattā*, or not-self: Notice that “not-self” is an adjective. It doesn't say that there is no self. It's simply saying that “This is not worth clinging to as your self.” It's a value judgment, that any clinging around what you recognize as not-self should be let go.

In line with the duties of the four noble truths, you're going to be applying these perceptions to different things in different ways at different stages of the path. In the beginning of the path, as you're developing your virtue, you focus these three perceptions on things that would pull you away from your virtue. For instance, the Buddha says that we might feel tempted to break a precept out of concern for our health, our relatives, or our wealth. An example would be deciding you had to lie to get out of suffering physical punishment, or to protect a relative, or to protect your belongings. For the sake of putting an end to suffering, though, the Buddha

recommends that you have to see health, relatives, and wealth as not-self, whereas your virtue is what's truly yours, a treasure you want to hold onto. So for the moment, you don't focus on the drawbacks of virtue. You focus on the drawbacks of any attachment to the things that would pull you away from it.

Similarly, when you're practicing concentration: Remember Ajaan Lee's instructions, that in developing concentration you're actually fighting against the three characteristics. This means that you focus on the drawbacks of things that would pull you out of concentration, while you still hold onto the concentration. For example, thoughts of sensual desire should be seen as inconstant and stressful, while you focus on making your concentration as constant and easeful as possible. As your concentration deepens, you then focus your analysis on things that would keep you in a more shallow level of concentration and prevent you from going into deeper concentration. For example, after you've made the breath as comfortable as possible, you see that directed thought and evaluation are inconstant and stressful, so you let them go. You don't yet focus on the drawbacks of the deepest concentration you can master.

Now as you're developing discernment, you have to hold onto the activity of discernment itself. You focus on your different attachments and then you focus on the concentration itself. The Buddha calls this "having your theme of reflection well in hand, well attended to, well-pondered, well-penetrated by means of discernment." The image he gives is of a man standing, watching a man sitting, or of a man sitting watching a man lying down [§8]. In other words, you pull out slightly from your concentration, enough to observe it but not enough to destroy it, and you start analyzing it in terms, say, of the different aggregates: form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness, as we mentioned last night. As you observe it, you realize that these aggregates are inconstant, stressful, not-self [§9]. Then you think about how any other level of concentration would be the same thing. So what do you do? As the Buddha says, you incline the mind to the deathless. Then the mind neither stays there nor moves, and you feel dispassion for everything, even for discernment itself.

In Zen they have an analogy for this. They say you've climbed up a flagpole and there's an animal climbing up the flagpole trying to eat you. The higher you go, the closer it gets. What do you do? You have to let go not only of the flagpole, but also of gravity. In other words, at that point, you're letting go of everything. So you drop even the perceptions of discernment, the perceptions that discernment was using, and that's when freedom is total.

This is why, when Ajaan Mahā Boowa was asked that question about nibbāna, whether it's self or not-self, his answer was, "Nibbāna is nibbāna." Perceptions of self and not-self, at that point, don't apply. This is also why there was that passage in the readings where the Buddha takes the analysis that's usually applied to

attachments—in other words, dealing with the allure and drawbacks and then the escape—and applies it even to the five faculties [§II]. In other words, you have to find the escape even from them. Ajaan Lee gives a good analogy for this. He says it's like using water to put out a fire. Once the fire's out, the water's not there either. The fire stands for your defilements; the water, for the path, including your discernment. It's only when everything is let go that total freedom can be found.

However, for most of us, when we come upon our very first taste of the deathless, our first reaction is like any child's reaction on seeing something. We want to eat it. We want to cling to the experience of the deathless. This is why awakening occurs in stages. It's because we're trying to hold onto nibbāna that we get pulled away from it, sort of thrown out—in other words, we can't stay there. Our clinging is what pulls us away from it.

Now, to solve this tendency the Buddha taught not only that all fabricated things are not-self, but also that all phenomena, fabricated or not, have to be perceived as not-self, too. Otherwise, we keep clinging to good things, and that way we can never get the freedom that comes from not clinging at all. Remember the image of the fire. It's not trapped by its fuel. It's trapped because it clings to the fuel. When it totally lets go, then it's freed.

But before you reach that point where you let go of all five faculties, you have to develop them so that they really do take charge of your mind. This is why Ajaan Lee gave that analogy of not letting go like a pauper. A pauper will say, "I let go of my BMW because I don't have a BMW." Which accomplishes nothing. First, you earn the money to buy the BMW and then you let it go. That way, even when you let it go, it's still there for you to use for your own purposes and to drive other people around. In other words, you get uses out of these things to help others, and then when your work is done, you totally let it go, leaving it in the world for other people to use after you're gone.

It's like the Buddha: He developed his concentration and discernment, but even after he let them go at his awakening, they were still there for him to use to help in his work of teaching. Then when he let them go totally, at the moment of his total nibbāna, he still left his discernment in the world for us here to use now.

So we work on these things even though we know someday we're going to have to let them go. We work on developing them because they'll do us a lot of good—getting us to the point where we can let go and find the deathless—and a lot of good for others.

We've been talking about the higher levels of the practice to give you a sense of inspiration that the path is worthwhile. It more than repays the effort that we put into it—and the work does reach a point where you don't have to do it anymore. As the ajaans in Thailand like to say, the work of the world is never finished, it never

knows an end, but the work of the Dhamma does reach an end. When it's done, it's done. That's why it's so worthwhile.

Conclusion

April 30, 2017

The question underlying this retreat has been: Who's in charge of your mind? You sit down to meditate with the intention to stay with the breath for an hour and suddenly, within a few minutes, you find yourself someplace else. This question is also relevant even when you're not meditating. You do something for the sake of happiness—in fact, all of our actions come from the desire to create happiness—yet so often the actions don't get the results you want. Sometimes you don't even do what you intended to do to begin with. So, who's in charge?

The Buddha says that we suffer because we let craving take charge of the mind—the craving that gives rise to becoming. The becoming itself depends on clinging. And we suffer in the clinging: clinging to things that disappoint, clinging to desires that create contradictory becomings. In other words, one desire will lead you in one direction, giving you a sense of your self and the world that goes in that direction, and then there will be another desire that creates another becoming that goes in another direction. So we're pulled not only between two desires, but also by two different senses of who we are and two different senses of the world we inhabit. No wonder we feel torn apart. We even cling to the experience of the deathless when we first encounter it.

The clinging, which is a kind of feeding, is a bad position to be in, and it's the result of bad judgment. However, the path to the end of suffering, which teaches you how to use your powers of judgment in a better way, does require becoming, too: the mind in the state of right concentration. It also requires a sense of the world where the practice is possible: a world where the Buddha showed the possibility of creating freedom from suffering based on our own efforts.

The five faculties are qualities that we develop so that we can be in charge of creating and strengthening good becomings in terms of how we define the goals we desire in life, how we define ourselves around that desire, and how we interpret the world so as to help with that desire. The five faculties put good judgment in charge of the mind. They take a wise desire—the desire for true happiness—and make it the key factor in shaping your views and actions: what you pay attention to, and the intentions you choose to follow. Throughout life. As you leave the retreat, you'll find

that if you depend on these five faculties, they put you in a position where you can fend off your inner moods, the moods that get in the way of the path, and also protect you from efforts from the world outside that try to define the world for you. They help you to define yourself and your sense of the world for the sake of a genuine happiness—so that your original motives for action can lead to the happiness you want.

So let's review the five faculties.

First, conviction: We live in a world where no one's in charge, so we're free to pursue our deepest desire for true happiness. Also, it's been shown by the Buddha that people can put an end to suffering based on their own efforts. This means that you have to treat your virtue and right views as your most valuable possessions. Don't let the fear of losing wealth, health, or relatives cause you to be willing to do unskillful things. Think for a moment of the ways in which society tries to use your fear or your greed to get you to do what they want, to vote for their policies or to buy the things that they're trying to sell you. Conviction in the importance of your actions helps you to fend off their influences. Conviction in the Buddha's awakening, in people of integrity, and in the Dhamma they teach, helps to ensure that your actions will be principled. Then, even when the situation gets difficult, you won't do anything to harm yourself—i.e., by breaking the precepts—or to harm others, i.e., trying to get them to break the precepts. That's conviction.

As for persistence, you use whatever means are necessary to keep yourself motivated to abandon unskillful actions and to develop skillful actions: in other words, you motivate yourself with qualities like heedfulness, compassion, humor, pride, a sense of healthy shame, and inspiration from good examples of the past. There was a question yesterday as to how to keep yourself motivated to stay on the path and I forgot to emphasize an important quality, which is joy: learning to find joy in the times when you are skillful. Each time you do something skillful, the Buddha recommends that you take joy in the fact that you can see you're advancing on the path, because that joy is going to help you in the future. If you feel tempted to stray from the path, remember the last time you felt tempted and yet you didn't give in, and how much joy you felt the next day. That joy will then help you resist the temptation the next time. At the same time, you learn not to get discouraged by your failures. There's a story they tell of a Zen master in Minnesota who had a student who wanted to go to Hollywood. The student wanted to try his fortune in the entertainment industry, so the teacher asked him, "What will you do if they knock you down?" And the student said, "Well, I guess I'll have to accept it." And the teacher said, "No! You get back up. You fight again. If they knock you down again, you get up again." That's persistence.

The third faculty is mindfulness. You do your best to remember that your actions now are the most important thing to focus on, you're alert to what you're actually

doing and the results you're getting, and you're ardent in putting your whole heart into wanting to do this well. Look after your mind as you'd look after a baby. You always have to keep the baby in mind. You're alert to what the baby is doing, and also to what you're doing to help raise the baby: what works and what doesn't work. And because you love the baby, you put your whole heart into doing this well. That's mindfulness.

As for concentration, try to find time every day to quiet the mind, to give it seclusion from the world—and in particular, from the world as defined by other people and your sense of “you” as defined by other people. Try to redefine yourself as a meditator, someone dedicated to training the mind for true happiness, someone who's developing the inner strength that will hold you in good stead no matter what happens in the world outside. This will give you the nourishment and inner ease and refreshment you need to keep you going. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, you need refreshment as a lubricant for your practice. If you don't have this sense of refreshment, it's like an engine with no lubricant. After a while, it'll burn up. So, find time every day to keep your mind lubricated.

As for discernment, remember the basic questions that lead to discernment: “What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness? And what, when I do it, will lead to long-term harm and suffering?” Wisdom or discernment lies in focusing on your actions and making proper value judgments about what to do and what not to do, remembering that long-term happiness is better than short-term happiness, and that everything in life depends on what you think, say, and do. Remember also the Buddha's advice on how to make proper value judgments. Regarding any action you're thinking of doing, look for the origination of the intention to do that action, see what happens if it passes away, look for the allure of the action or the intention, look for the drawbacks, and then look for the escape. In other words, if it's an unskillful action, look for why you're drawn to it and then look for the drawbacks. And once you see that the drawbacks outweigh the allure, you can develop the dispassion that provides the escape. For example, you wake up in the morning and you know, “If I get up now, I could meditate for half an hour.” Then another voice in the mind says, “No, I'd rather sleep for half an hour. I need the rest.” Can you trust that voice? What's the allure of that voice? Then you can ask yourself how many people gained awakening by sleeping an extra half hour. That can help you get up.

Now, maybe you're telling yourself that these teachings are just for monastics or just for people on a retreat, but that very thought right there weakens you. You have to ask yourself: Which voice inside you is saying that and why is it saying that? If you don't know clearly what voice that is, resist it. It'll get more insistent and more explicit in its reasons, and then you'll know it for what it is. That's the kind of voice that's exposed by developing the five faculties, to see what its allure is, but also what

its drawbacks are and how you can find some escape from it.

In this way, you don't let the world outside or your inner moods or defilements define you. You can define yourself by the desire to find awakening. In the same way, you don't let the world outside or your moods define the worldview in which you choose to live. You're in charge, and with these five faculties in charge of your mind, you find that you can trust yourself more and more to do what's right, both for yourself and for the world touched by your actions.

Q&A

Q: I've just read in a small booklet that the Buddha never taught about relative truth and absolute truth. When did this appear and why?

A: The distinction between two levels of truth is something that came a couple centuries after the Buddha. It developed out of the issue of self and not-self.

As I mentioned in one of my earlier retreats, the question, "Is there a self or is there no self?" is one that the Buddha never answered, because either way you answer it, you're going to fall into wrong view. If you say there is no self, it leads to the wrong view of annihilation. If you say that there is a self, that becomes something that you're going to cling to. If you say that there is no separate self but there is a connected self, then the question is: Why is it that when the Buddha was awakened, everybody else was not awakened, too? After all, if we were One or connected, his awakening would have spread to everyone else.

As the Buddha said, all of these answers risk getting you into what he calls a thicket of views. And he also told the monks, "Don't get involved in debates." They had formal debates in India in which a king would set the question, and then he would invite people from different religions to come and give their answers. Based on their answers, he would then choose which religion he wanted to support. The problem with that kind of debate, of course, is that once the king sets the question, you can't say, "The Buddha said to put that question aside." You'd be telling the king it's a stupid question. So the Buddha told his monks to stay away from those debates entirely, but over the centuries, the monks decided not to heed his advice. Perhaps they wanted the support of the kings.

With the passage of time, the monks were asked whether there is or isn't a self, and they finally came up with the answer that there is no self. But if there is no self, who meditates, who practices virtue, who attains awakening? And if you look in the Canon, you see that the Buddha does talk about depending on yourself, and there's the passage that says the self is its own mainstay. There's another passage where he recommends taking your love for yourself as your guiding principle for keeping on the path. So, when the Buddha's talking about a self, is he lying? To get around this problem, the monks came up with a theory that there are two levels of truth. There's a self on the relative level, but no self on the absolute. And we find this in all the schools of Buddhism.

So that's where the distinction comes from: It comes from trying to answer a question that the Buddha said not to answer, in a context that the Buddha said to avoid.

Q: Is there any difference between the awakening of the Buddha and the awakening of the other masters who followed him? If not, what greater merit does the Buddha have?

A: To begin with, the aspect of awakening that is not different is the purity of the awakening: total freedom from suffering, total freedom from defilement. The difference lies in the fact that the Buddha was the one who discovered the path, which required a lot more effort and discernment on his part. In addition to that, he gained a lot of mental powers that the other arahants don't have and that enabled him to teach in a lot more detail, to read the minds of his students in much more detail, and to formulate a teaching that would be just right for them.

Q: Why is it that Theravāda is considered, with a certain amount of irony, as the small vehicle, whereas Mahāyānists call themselves the great vehicle, which carries its name because they're more generous?—their goal being, always, the love of others, whereas for Theravāda it's said to be first the love of yourself?

A: It's not that Theravādins don't have any concern about other people. It's more that we have a different sense of what we're able to do for other people. We can teach other people how to gain awakening and we can set them a good example, but we can't actually awaken other people. And it's also not true that in Theravāda practice you don't do good for other people. Generosity and virtue are large parts of the path. Even your mindfulness practice is good for others: The Buddha says it's like being part of an acrobatic team. If you can maintain your balance at all times, it makes it easier for other people on the team to maintain theirs.

And even though arahants leave saṃsāra entirely, they leave a lot of good things behind. Think of the case of Ajaan Mun. Without him, I don't know where I would be. The forest tradition would not have existed, and Thailand probably would have become Communist—because many of the Communists in Thailand said the reason that they still wanted to hold to Buddhism, instead of rejecting religion, was because they saw the example of the forest monks. So the good that Ajaan Mun did is still living with us.

Q: The quality of being enlightened is happiness. Nevertheless, in some of the suttas the Buddha says that before his death he was sick and that he did not feel well except in a state of meditation. How can one understand this contradiction?

A: Awakening is a quality of the mind, while the body continues to be a human body, and the nature of the body is to age, grow ill, and die. The only way that the

Buddha would avoid actually feeling the pain of his body would be to enter deep concentration. But this doesn't mean that he suffered from the pain while he was feeling it. This is an important distinction: There can be pain, but you don't have to suffer from it. Remember, suffering doesn't lie in the pain. Suffering lies in the clinging. Without clinging, there's no suffering even in the face of the pain of aging, illness, and death.

It's also the case that when people continue to live after total awakening, it's because they still have some kamma that has to work itself out, which may get expressed as pains in the body. When that kamma is worked out, then the awakened person passes away.

Q: Does awakening contain a dimension of the infinite, like infinite space?

A: It's freedom. There are no limitations on that freedom, but it's beyond space and time.

Q: "Because there is the non-born, the non-created, the non-formed, and the unconditioned, there can be the transcendence of that which is born, created, formed, and conditioned." Could you explain this sentence of the Buddha from the Udāna?

A: Basically, the message is that we live in a world of suffering, and there's suffering because there is the born, the created, the formed, and the conditioned. If there were not a dimension that was not born or created, where would we go to escape suffering? It's because there is such a dimension that we can contact through the mind: That's why there can be an end to suffering—and we practice for the sake of that dimension [[§§12-15](#)].

Readings

§1. “Monks, there are these five faculties. Which five? The faculty of conviction, the faculty of persistence, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of discernment.

“Now what is the faculty of conviction? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, has conviction, is convinced of the Tathāgata’s awakening: ‘Indeed, the Blessed One is worthy & rightly self-awakened, consummate in clear-knowing & conduct, well-gone, an expert with regard to the cosmos, unexcelled trainer of people fit to be tamed, teacher of devas & human beings, awakened, blessed.’ This is called the faculty of conviction.

“And what is the faculty of persistence? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, keeps his persistence aroused for abandoning unskillful mental qualities and taking on skillful mental qualities. He is steadfast, solid in his effort, not shirking his duties with regard to skillful mental qualities. He generates desire, endeavors, arouses persistence, upholds & exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen... for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen... for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen... (and) for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen. This is called the faculty of persistence.

“And what is the faculty of mindfulness? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, is mindful, is endowed with excellent proficiency in mindfulness, remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago. He remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves... the mind in & of itself... mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. This is called the faculty of mindfulness.

“And what is the faculty of concentration? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, making it his object to let go, attains concentration, attains singleness of mind. Quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities—enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of

concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance. With the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhāna, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.’ With the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. This is called the faculty of concentration.

“And what is the faculty of discernment? There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, is discerning, endowed with discernment of arising & passing away—noble, penetrating, leading to the right ending of stress. He discerns, as it has come to be: ‘This is stress...This is the origination of stress...This is the cessation of stress...This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.’ This is called the faculty of discernment.

“These are the five faculties.” — SN 48:10

§2. “Now where is the faculty of conviction to be seen? In the four stream-entry factors.” — SN 48:8

§3. “Association with good people is a factor for stream-entry. Listening to the true Dhamma is a factor for stream-entry. Appropriate attention is a factor for stream-entry. Practice of the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma is a factor for stream-entry.” — SN 55:5

§4. “And which are the four factors of stream-entry with which he [a stream-winner] is endowed?

“There is the case where the disciple of the noble ones is endowed with verified confidence in the Awakened One: ‘Indeed, the Blessed One is worthy & rightly self-awakened, consummate in clear-knowing & conduct, well-gone, an expert with regard to the cosmos, unexcelled trainer of people fit to be tamed, teacher of devas & human beings, awakened, blessed.’

“He is endowed with verified confidence in the Dhamma: ‘The Dhamma is well taught by the Blessed One, to be seen here & now, timeless, inviting verification, pertinent, to be experienced by the observant for themselves.’

“He is endowed with verified confidence in the Saṅgha: ‘The Saṅgha of the Blessed One’s disciples who have practiced well... who have practiced straightforwardly... who have practiced methodically...who have practiced masterfully—in other words, the four pairs, the eight individuals—they are the Saṅgha of the Blessed One’s disciples: deserving of gifts, deserving of hospitality, deserving of offerings, deserving of respect, the incomparable field of merit for the world.’

“He is endowed with virtues that are appealing to the noble ones: untorn, unbroken, unspotted, unsplattered, liberating, praised by the observant, ungrasped at, leading to concentration.

“These are the four factors of stream-entry with which he is endowed.” — AN 10:92

§5. “Now what, TigerPaw (Byagghapajja), is meant by admirable friendship? There is the case where a layperson, in whatever town or village he may dwell, spends time with householders or householders’ sons, young or old, who are advanced in virtue. He talks with them, engages them in discussions. He emulates consummate conviction in those who are consummate in conviction, consummate virtue in those who are consummate in virtue, consummate generosity in those who are consummate in generosity, & consummate discernment in those who are consummate in discernment. This is called admirable friendship.” — AN 8:54

§6. “And how is mindfulness the governing principle? The mindfulness that ‘I will make complete any training with regard to good conduct that is not yet complete, or I will protect with discernment any training with regard to good conduct that is complete’ is well established right within. The mindfulness that ‘I will make complete any training with regard to the basics of the holy life that is not yet complete, or I will protect with discernment any training with regard to the basics of the holy life that is complete’ is well established right within. The mindfulness that ‘I will scrutinize with discernment any Dhamma that is not yet scrutinized, or I will protect with discernment any Dhamma that has been scrutinized’ is well established right within. The mindfulness that ‘I will touch through release any Dhamma that is not yet touched, or I will protect with discernment any Dhamma that has been touched’ is well established right within.

“This is how mindfulness is the governing principle.” — AN 4:245

§7. Visākha: “Now what is concentration, lady? What qualities are the themes of concentration? What qualities are the requisites of concentration? What is the development of concentration?”

Sister Dhammadinnā: “Singleness of mind [*cittass’ekaggatā*] is concentration, friend Visākha; the four establishing of mindfulness are the themes of concentration; the four right exertions are the requisites of concentration; and any cultivation, development, & pursuit of these qualities is the development of concentration.” — MN 44

§8. “Now what, monks, is five-factored noble right concentration? There is the case where a monk—quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful

qualities—enters and remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of seclusion. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born from seclusion.

“Just as if a dexterous bathman or bathman’s apprentice would pour bath powder into a brass basin and knead it together, sprinkling it again and again with water, so that his ball of bath powder—saturated, moisture-laden, permeated within and without—would nevertheless not drip; even so, the monk permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of seclusion. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born from seclusion. This is the first development of the five-factored noble right concentration.

“And further, with the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters and remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought and evaluation—internal assurance. He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of concentration. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of concentration.

“Just like a lake with spring-water welling up from within, having no inflow from east, west, north, or south, and with the skies periodically supplying abundant showers, so that the cool fount of water welling up from within the lake would permeate and pervade, suffuse and fill it with cool waters, there being no part of the lake unpervaded by the cool waters; even so, the monk permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of concentration. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of concentration. This is the second development of the five-factored noble right concentration.

“And further, with the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters and remains in the third jhāna, and of him the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.’ He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the pleasure divested of rapture, so that there is nothing of his entire body unpervaded with pleasure divested of rapture.

“Just as in a blue-, white-, or red-lotus pond, there may be some of the blue, white, or red lotuses which, born and growing in the water, stay immersed in the water and flourish without standing up out of the water, so that they are permeated and pervaded, suffused and filled with cool water from their roots to their tips, and nothing of those blue, white, or red lotuses would be unpervaded with cool water; even so, the monk permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the pleasure divested of rapture. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded with

pleasure divested of rapture. This is the third development of the five-factored noble right concentration.

“And further, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—he enters and remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. He sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness, so that there is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness.

“Just as if a man were sitting wrapped from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of his body to which the white cloth did not extend; even so, the monk sits, permeating his body with a pure, bright awareness. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness. This is the fourth development of the five-factored noble right concentration.

“And further, the monk has his theme of reflection well in hand, well attended to, well-pondered, well-penetrated by means of discernment.

“Just as if one person were to reflect on another, or a standing person were to reflect on a sitting person, or a sitting person were to reflect on a person lying down; even so, monks, the monk has his theme of reflection well in hand, well attended to, well-pondered, well-penetrated by means of discernment. This is the fifth development of the five-factored noble right concentration.” — AN 5:28

§9. “Suppose that an archer or archer’s apprentice were to practice on a straw man or mound of clay, so that after a while he would become able to shoot long distances, to fire accurate shots in rapid succession, and to pierce great masses. In the same way, there is the case where a monk... enters & remains in the first jhāna rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: ‘This is peace, this is exquisite—the pacification of all fabrications; the relinquishing of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.’

“Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents. Or, if not, then—through this very Dhamma-passion, this Dhamma-delight, and from the total ending of the five lower fetters [self-identification views, grasping at habits & practices, uncertainty, sensual passion, and irritation]—he is due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world.

“[Similarly with the remaining three jhānas. The passage also gives a similar

account of the first three of the four formless attainments, except that “form” is dropped from the list of aggregates.]” — AN 9:36

§10. On one occasion Ven. Sāriputta and Ven. Mahā Koṭṭhita were staying near Vārāṇasī in the Deer Park at Isipatana. As he was sitting to one side, Ven. Mahā Koṭṭhita said to Ven. Sāriputta, “‘Clear knowing, clear knowing,’ it is said, friend Sāriputta. Which clear knowing? And to what extent is one immersed in clear knowing?”

“There is the case, my friend, where an instructed disciple of the noble ones discerns, as they have come to be, the origination, the disappearance, the allure, the drawbacks of—and the escape from—form.

“He discerns, as they have come to be, the origination, the disappearance, the allure, the drawbacks of—and the escape from— feeling... perception... fabrications.

“He discerns, as they have come to be, the origination, the disappearance, the allure, the drawbacks of—and the escape from— consciousness.

“This, my friend, is called clear knowing, and it’s to this extent that one is immersed in clear knowing.” — SN 22:132

§11. “Monks, there are these five faculties. Which five? The faculty of conviction, the faculty of persistence, the faculty of mindfulness, the faculty of concentration, the faculty of discernment. When—having discerned, as they have come to be, the origination, the passing away, the allure, the drawbacks, and the escape from these five faculties—a monk is released from lack of clinging/sustenance, he is called an arahant whose effluents are ended, who has reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, laid to waste the fetter of becoming, and who is released through right gnosis.” — SN 48:4

§12. “There is that dimension, monks, where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind; neither dimension of the infinitude of space, nor dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, nor dimension of nothingness, nor dimension of neither perception nor non-perception; neither this world, nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon. And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor staying; neither passing away nor arising: unestablished, unevolving, without support [mental object]. This, just this, is the end of stress.” — Ud 8:1

§13. “There is, monks, an unborn—unbecome—unmade—unfabricated. If there were not that unborn—unbecome—unmade—unfabricated, there would not be the case that escape from the born—become—made—fabricated would be discerned. But precisely because there is an unborn—unbecome—unmade—unfabricated,

escape from the born—become—made—fabricated is discerned.” — Ud 8:3

§14. “Therefore, monks, that dimension should be experienced where the eye [vision] ceases and the perception [mental label] of form fades. That dimension should be experienced where the ear ceases and the perception of sound fades. That dimension should be experienced where the nose ceases and the perception of aroma fades. That dimension should be experienced where the tongue ceases and the perception of flavor fades. That dimension should be experienced where the body ceases and the perception of tactile sensation fades. That dimension should be experienced where the intellect ceases and the perception of idea fades. That dimension should be experienced.” — SN 35:117

§15. “Just as if there were a roofed house or a roofed hall having windows on the north, the south, or the east. When the sun rises, and a ray has entered by way of the window, where does it land?”

“On the western wall, lord.”

“And if there is no western wall, where does it land?”

“On the ground, lord.”

“And if there is no ground, where does it land?”

“On the water, lord.”

“And if there is no water, where does it land?”

“It doesn’t land, lord.”

“In the same way, where there is no passion for the nutriment of physical food... contact... intellectual intention... consciousness, where there is no delight, no craving, then consciousness does not land there or grow. Where consciousness does not land or grow, name-&-form does not alight. Where name-&-form does not alight, there is no growth of fabrications. Where there is no growth of fabrications, there is no production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is no production of renewed becoming in the future, there is no future birth, aging, & death. That, I tell you, has no sorrow, affliction, or despair.” — SN 12:64

Glossary

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor.

Anattā: Not-self.

Anicca: Inconstant.

Añjali: A gesture of respect, in which the hands are placed palm-to-palm in front of the face or the heart.

Arahant: A “worthy one” or “pure one”; a person whose mind is free of defilement and thus not destined for further rebirth. A title for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples.

Bhava: Becoming. A sense of identity within a particular world of experience. The three levels of becoming are on the level of sensuality, form, and formlessness.

Brahmā: An inhabitant of the higher heavenly realms of form or formlessness.

Brahman: A member of the priestly caste, which claimed to be the highest caste in India, based on birth.

Brahmavihāra: A mental attitude that, when developed to a level where it can extend without limit to all beings, is conducive to rebirth in one of the Brahmā worlds. There are four altogether: unlimited goodwill (*mettā*), unlimited compassion (*karuṇā*), unlimited empathetic joy (*muditā*), and unlimited equanimity (*upekkhā*).

Chedi (Thai): A spired monument, usually containing relics of the Buddha or other arahants.

Deva (*devatā*): Literally, “shining one.” A being on the subtle levels of sensuality, form, or formlessness, living either in terrestrial or heavenly realms.

Dhamma: (1) Event, action; (2) a phenomenon in and of itself; (3) mental quality; (4) doctrine, teaching; (5) nibbāna (although there are passages describing nibbāna as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: Dharma.

Dukkha: Stress; suffering.

Jhāna: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion.

Kamma: (1) Intentional action; (2) the results of intentional actions. Sanskrit form: Karma.

Khandha: Aggregate; physical and mental phenomena as they are directly experienced; the raw material for a sense of self: *rūpa*—physical form; *vedanā*—feeling-tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain; *saññā*—perception, mental label; *saṅkhāra*—fabrication, thought construct; and *viññāṇa*—sensory consciousness, the act of taking note of sense data and ideas as they occur. Sanskrit form: Skandha.

Māra: The personification of temptation and all forces, within and without, that create obstacles to release from *saṃsāra*.

Mettā: Goodwill (see *Brahmavihāra*).

Nibbāna: Literally, the “unbinding” of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. Sanskrit form: *Nirvāṇa*.

Pāli: The language of the oldest extant Canon of the Buddha’s teachings.

Saṃsāra: Transmigration; the process of wandering through repeated states of becoming, with their attendant death and rebirth.

Saṃvega: A sense of dismay over the meaninglessness and futility of life as it is ordinarily lived, combined with a strong sense of urgency in looking for a way out.

Saṅgha: 1) On the conventional (*sammati*) level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. 2) On the ideal (*ariya*) level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least stream-entry, the first stage of awakening.

Saṅkhāra: Fabrication (see *Khandha*).

Satipaṭṭhāna: Establishing of mindfulness.

Sutta: Discourse.

Tathāgata: Literally, one who has “become authentic (*tatha-āgata*)” or who is “truly gone (*tathā-gata*)”: an epithet used in ancient India for a person who has attained the highest religious goal. In Buddhism, it usually denotes the Buddha, although occasionally it also denotes any of his arahant disciples.

Upekkhā: Equanimity (see *Brahmavihāra*).

Vinaya: The monastic discipline, whose rules and traditions comprise six volumes in printed text. The Buddha's own term for the religion he taught was, "This Dhamma-Vinaya."

Vipassanā: Clear-seeing insight into the processes of fabrication in the mind, with the purpose of developing dispassion for those processes.

Wat (Thai): Monastery.

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