

A photograph of a river with bare tree branches in the foreground and golden reflections on the water. The water is dark blue with shimmering golden reflections, likely from a sunset or sunrise. The branches are dark and intricate, framing the water.

*ePublished
Dhamma Talks*

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ePublished Dhamma Talks

Volume II

by

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Beginner's Mind

November, 2002

Try to bring a fresh mind to the breath each time you meditate. Imagine that you're someone who hasn't been living in a body for a couple of lifetimes and you're suddenly back in this body with this unusual experience: There's an energy flowing around the body, flowing in the body, flowing in and out. And so you're curious, you're inquisitive, you want to find out what it's like. If you can bring that kind of fresh, inquisitive mind to the meditation, you can learn things. If you have everything all figured out beforehand, it gets in the way of your learning. If you have a lot of negative attitudes about yourself in the meditation, that gets in the way, too. This doesn't mean that we don't bring lessons that we've learned from one session of meditation into the next one, simply that we need the fresh eyes to see whether that particular lesson from the past actually applies right now.

So you have to develop an independent observer who's not tied up with any of the agendas of your mind, who just wants to watch with a sense of inquisitive doubt. We all bring doubts to the meditation. The problem is learning how to bring the right kinds of doubt. Inquisitive doubt is the kind that leads you to learn because it's open to new things. But there are other kinds of doubt, though, that actually get in the way. There's nihilistic doubt, which is not really doubt at all. It's just a different kind of belief—the belief that the practice won't work, or that you aren't up to the practice. So recognise that—it's not really doubt, it's a kind of belief that gets in the way—and look to see what happens, what's actually going on right now.

When you can bring a fresh attitude toward the breath, you start seeing things you didn't see before. There are different kinds of ins and outs to the breathing that you might not have anticipated. You may notice that the breath is coming in and out through a part of the body that you hadn't expected it to before. Or your experience of the in-breath and the out-breath is not quite what you thought it was. And unless you're willing to look again and look again and look again like this, it's hard to see anything new.

So from that point of view, you need the attitude that you're coming new to the breath, coming new to the meditation, each and every time, so that you're not weighted down by the past. When you're new to observing the present, you're also new to observing the lessons you *did* learn from the past. It's not that you totally forget everything. It's just that you're willing to look at everything

again in a new light. When the breath is this particular way, does it remind you of any time you've dealt with the breath in the past? Perceive the breath in this particular way, as it is right now. You have to look with new eyes and then leave your mind open to see what comes in, what it reminds you of in terms of other lessons you learned from the past to see if they would work with this particular kind of breathing. When the mind is open in this way, all the useful things you've learned in the past are right at your fingertips as well.

So when they talk about Beginner's Mind, it doesn't mean that you're totally ignorant, totally forgetful of lessons you've already learned. It's just that you look at things in a fresh light, both what you experience right now and what you remember from the past. You're willing to try on a take that's new. The phrase "try on" is important. Often we feel that we've been committed to a particular way of acting and it seems like a major overhaul to change it. Don't think in those terms. Think in terms of trying something on, experimenting.

When Ajaan Fuang used to say to play with the breath, this is what he was talking about: Experiment. Get some enjoyment out of it. If you can't get enjoyment out of it, the breath becomes a task master; your meditation object becomes an adversary. It's as if it has guardian demons at the door, like the guardian demons in the temples in Thailand. Just the thought of meditating brings to mind the snarls and the angry faces of the guardian demons, and you get repelled.

So forget about them. Remind yourself that if it weren't for the breath you wouldn't be here right now. The breath has looked after you this long, even though you haven't looked after it very much. Still, it's been faithful and loyal, even though it stayed in the background. Give it the chance to come up to the forefront to see what else it can do when you take proper care of it, when you give it the attention it deserves.

And think of ways of making the breath interesting. Think of the breath coming in and out of body parts that you normally wouldn't think about: the legs, or the elbows. The base of the spine. Think of what you can do change the experience of the breath, the texture of the breath. How smooth can you make it? One of Ajaan Fuang's students talked about the time when he was meditating in a bus—he wasn't normally that good a meditator, but for some reason when he sat on a bus he found it very easy for the mind to settle down—and the breath felt delicious. Well, how do you make the breath delicious? How does that happen?

In other words, try things out. Use your ingenuity. Use your imagination. They've done studies of people with really good manual skills, the one's who really excel, say, in a sport or a musical instrument. And the ones that are a cut above good are the ones who use their imagination. They think up new ways of

doing things. Yo Yo Ma tells of playing a cello in a concert and suddenly one of the strings on his cello broke. Instead of stopping the concert, he decided to see if he could continue playing the cello with the missing string. Later he said that it was by far one of the most enjoyable concerts he had ever played. He was willing to experiment, use his imagination and see what came.

That's how you learn how to get enjoyment out of your meditation. Use your imagination in finding things that will arrest and intrigue the mind. There's an awful lot going on in the body. Think of all the parts you have in your body. Think about how the breath interacts with them. Ajaan Fuang once talked about feeling the breath in your bones. There's the breath in your blood vessels. See if you can locate those sensations. Once you've located them and can stay with them for a while, what can you do with them next? What can you do with them to make them more pleasant, more interesting, more arresting?

This way the meditation always stays new. If it were a simple cut-and-dried technique, that would be the kind of insight it would produce—cut and dried. But because it's a live process, you're exploring the mind, gaining greater and greater sensitivity to what's going on. And then, as in any exploration, you can't simply just follow the rules. You've got to learn how to make variations on them, try things out, adjust this a little bit, adjust that a little bit.

That way you learn about cause and effect. If you don't experiment, if you don't take an active attitude in being curious, being inquisitive, how are you ever going to learn? How's the meditation going to teach you anything new? It simply becomes a mechanical process and the question is: Are you willing to put your mind through the ringer like that, through an assembly line that somebody else has set up? That's a scary prospect. But if you think of it instead as being a prospect of exploring what's going on inside, gaining a sense of cause and effect inside your mind, you can sort out the causes that are really useful and the ones that aren't.

That's when the meditation really leads to insight—because after all, the insight here is to see what we haven't seen before, to realise what we haven't realised before, so that what we come to see and realise will lead us to attain what we've never attained before. The meditation is supposed to take you to a new place—and that can't happen unless you experiment and explore, unless you keep looking at things anew.

Exploring

October 24, 2003

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

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

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

Think of Isaac Newton. Everybody knew it was the nature of objects to fall. Certain objects fell; other objects didn't fall. The moon didn't fall, for instance, which meant, they thought, that the moon was made of something different from, say, apples or rocks. But he asked a question that everybody thought was a stupid question: "Why do things fall? How does falling relate to other types of motion? What does it mean that it's something's nature to fall?" And because he was willing to ask these stupid questions, he discovered gravity and the laws of motion.

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

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

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

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

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

What you’re trying to do here as you meditate is to make a consistent line through time. When you do that, you begin to see cause and effect more clearly. The mind grows more stable, more grounded in the present moment. The

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

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

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

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

When the admissions people in some of the more advanced universities throughout the country interview candidates who want to be brain surgeons, they have to assume that everyone who walks in the door is smart; no dumb people are going to apply to be brain surgeons. But not everybody who's smart is going to be a good surgeon. So the admissions people need the right questions to ferret out the qualities that make a smart person a good surgeon. And they've found that one of the best questions is: “Can you tell us about a mistake you made recently?” And the best follow-up question is: “If you had a second chance to do it all over again, how you correct your mistake?” The candidates who

answer that they can't think of any mistakes are the ones who are thrown out immediately. The ones who say "Oh, I made a mistake the other day...and this is how I'd do it again the second time around": Those are the ones who'd make good surgeons.

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

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

The Four Bases of Success

January 13, 2004

For meditation to go well, you have to like what you're doing—because, after all, it's a big job: working through all the many habits by which you create suffering for yourself.

So it's not something to do in a weekend retreat and then think you've got it all done. It's a long term process. And if you like what you're doing, it goes a lot more easily. This is why when you're meditating you want to become friends with the breath. Don't regard your meditation object as your opponent. Remember all that the breath has done for you. It's kept you alive all these years. It's what keeps the body and the mind together.

And even right here in the present moment, the breath can give a sense of pleasure if you allow it to. So explore that possibility. Get so that the idea of the breath as your friend is not simply an abstract idea. It's an immediate, visceral experience. You gain a sense of familiarity, a sense of liking the breath, of knowing how to use the breath to nourish the body. And whatever part of the body feels like it could use some breath energy, let it have some, no matter where in the body it may be. No matter how the breath is going to come in or how it's going to go out, allow every part of the body to have some breath energy so you get a strong visceral sense that the breath is a good companion to have on this path you're following.

The same principle works on the external level. The Buddha places a lot of emphasis on harmony within the *sangha*. That's why we have the *vinaya*, to make sure that our life here together is a life conducive to the practice. People get along because they avoid harming one another. Instead of being a distraction, life in the community then becomes an aid to the practice. Instead of dwelling on what they don't like about each other, the members of the community think about what they do to help one another. And each person is willing to go out of his way for the other people, to develop what the Thais call *naam jai*, which probably is best translated as “generosity of spirit” or “warm-heartedness,” a willingness to go that extra mile. Community life becomes a life conducive to the practice. The practice goes a lot more easily.

You want the same principle of harmony inside as well. Learn how to get along with the breath. Don't go in with a lot of preconceived notions of what the breath has to be like. Explore. Listen to the breath. See what it has to say. What

kind of breathing would feel good right now? Coming in where? Going out where? Allow it to happen. Open your mind away from your preconceived notions about what's happening in the breathing, and a lot of different ways of breathing will become possible. Explore them to see which ones are really helpful right now and which ones are not so helpful.

As you get more and more familiar with the breath this way, you develop a strong sense of what in Pali is called *chanda*, the desire to stick with the practice. It's the first of the bases of success. If you want to succeed in meditation, the first thing you've got to do is to like your meditation object, to like the process of meditating. Allow it to capture your imagination. This breath energy in the body: How many different ways can it come in? How many different ways can it go out? How many varieties of breath are there? What can they do for different mental states? When you're angry, what's a good way to breathe to calm down the anger? When you're lazy, what's a good way breathe to give yourself more energy? When you're feeling not quite right physically, what kind of breath is good for you? As you set up these questions in your mind and begin to explore, you find that the breath really does become fascinating. Once it's captured your imagination, you can get absorbed in it.

The word *jhana* is often translated as mental absorption, and things are absorbing only when they're interesting. So see in what way the breath can become interesting. It's not just in-out, in-out, in-out. "How many more ins and outs am I going to have to count until awakening comes?" We're not doing this as a ritual, simply going through the motions and hoping that the motions will get us to where we want to go. After all they call meditation "practice," and as with any kind of practice—whether it's a musical instrument or a sport—it's how much attention you pay, how much you really look at what you're doing, how you find ways of doing it more efficiently, with less and less wasted effort and a greater sense of well being to show for it: That's what's going to improve it. And it all has to start with *liking* the breath.

The second of the four bases of success is *viriya*, persistence: You really stick with it. You do it again, then you do it again, and then you do it again. You keep at it. Be a breath-a-holic. They say that when alcoholics walk into somebody's house, they'll very quickly pick up on where the alcohol is stored. That's where their antennae are directed. They may be missing a lot of other things going on in that particular house, but they're very quick to pick up on where the alcohol is kept. Well, you want to be a breath-a-holic. Have your antennae set for: How can you stay with the breath in this situation? How can you stay with the breath in that situation? You're talking with somebody you don't like – how do you stay with the breath? You're talking with someone you do like – how do you stay with the breath? You're working at a task – how do you stay with the breath? Where is

the breath? How is it going? Have your antennae focused on that, and keep it focused there in any and all situations.

They've done studies of athletes – athletes who are talented and very good *vs.* those who are talented and exceptionally good – and basically, in terms of the raw physical strengths with which they're working, there's not that much difference. The difference between being good and being exceptional lies a lot in how much time they devote to their practice. And it's the same with the breath. You might be a good meditator. You've got the talent. It comes easily. But if you don't give it that much time, you won't take it as far as it can go, because a lot of the meditation lies in your willingness to give, give of your energy, give of you time.

Don't be stingy with your meditation. This is one of the reasons why generosity is emphasized as an important virtue leading up to meditation. Try to develop the mind state where you're happy to give, happy to share, happy to go out of your way. What this means is that you're willing to put forth an effort even though the results may not be immediate. You trust that in terms of the larger good, the long-term good, this is for your own true well being. And when you bring that attitude to the meditation, it's a lot easier to put in the extra effort, to put in the extra hours, to sit through pain, to sit longer than you might otherwise, to sit when you don't feel like sitting.

This is important. If you sit only when you feel like sitting, then that's all you know: the mind that likes to sit. As for the mind that doesn't like to sit, you never get to explore it. You never get to figure out why it doesn't like to sit. You never figure out how to work your way around its recalcitrance. If you sit down and say, "Oh, today's meditation is not going well, I'd better go do something else," that's the wrong attitude. The right attitude is, "It's not going well, so let's found out why." Look into it. As you explore the mind that doesn't want to sit, you come to understand it and you also come to learn how to work your way around it so that that's not the deciding factor as to whether or not you're going to sit, whether or not you're going to be with the breath. Over time you find that there are fewer and fewer and fewer circumstances, either inside or outside, physical or mental, where you can't meditate.

When there's a lot of noise outside, there's a certain way of meditating to deal with it. You can think of your body as a big window screen that allows the noise to go through. You're not catching it. You'll understand this only when you catch the mind in the act of catching the noise and complaining about the noise—just make sure that you don't believe the complaints. That way you come to notice how the mind grabs onto things when it really doesn't have to. And that way, by sitting in a noisy place, you learn something about the mind. You learn to work your way around the defilements that are ordinarily so powerful.

All this comes under the factor of persistence, just sticking with the meditation—not thinking how many years you’ve meditated in the past, how many more years you’re going to have to do it—you just stick with it right now, right now, right now. Don’t carry the past and the future around. It’s a burden. The present moment is sufficient for carrying the present moment, but it can’t stand up under the weight of all your past and all your future. So when the meditation seems burdensome, just realize that you’re holding on to the past of your meditation, you’re holding on to the future of your meditation. Drop that and just be with the right now. That makes it a lot easier to just stick with it, stick with it.

Ajaan Chah says that sometimes your mind will say, “How much longer am I going to sit here?” And your answer should be, “I don’t know. Let’s see. Can I sit with this breath? Can I sit with the next breath?” Sit with one breath at a time and you find after a while that you get a lot of breaths under your belt without you’re having to carry them around or find them oppressive or burdensome. That’s persistence, the second of the bases for success.

The third in Pali is called *citta*, which means that you’re really intent on what you’re doing, you pay attention, you notice things. Try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breathing feels. Be as sensitive as possible to what state your mind is in as you’re coming into the meditation. Sometimes you’re coming in with an overactive mind, sometimes with an underactive mind, sometimes with a discouraged mind. If that’s the case, you have to stop before you focus on the breath and straighten out the mind a little bit. Figure out ways of thinking that bring the mind more into balance. Or if it’s simply a question of too much or too little energy, then figure out what kind of breathing would be good for a mind with too much energy, what breathing is good for a mind with too little energy. Focus on that.

Try to be sensitive to what you’re doing and the results that you’re getting. Understand that you’re not here waiting for the future or anticipating things in the future to come, but paying very careful attention to what you’re doing right now. If you lose that focus, then you’ve lost the focus of the meditation. If you’re sitting and anticipating, remember that right anticipation is not one of the factors of the path—it’s certainly not one of the factors of concentration. Just focus on what you’ve already got.

And the next question is, “What would be a more pleasant breath?” Be sensitive. The more sensitive you are to how your breathing feels throughout the body, the more you’ll know intuitively what kind of breathing will feel good. So again, we’re not just going through the motions. We’re trying to watch each time we breathe to see if we can catch something in the breathing that we didn’t notice before—particularly in the direction of figuring out what kind of

breathing would feel better right now, “better” being defined by what the body needs, what the mind needs at that particular moment. This requires that you be very attentive to what you’re doing.

If you simply follow the steps that you’ve read in a book without applying this quality of attentiveness, you never develop your own discernment. Simply going through the motions doesn’t do it. You have to watch. You have to make the practice *your* practice through your quality of attention, intentness. You’re not here to learn about Buddhism, you’re here to learn about your own mind. Buddhism gives you the tools. It points you to places where you might see something interesting, but it’s up to you to see.

The fourth quality in Pali is *vimansa*, and it’s translated in lots of different ways. Basically it comes down to the mind’s analytical abilities. We’re often taught, “Get away from the discriminating mind. Allow everything to be one,” but I haven’t seen that in the Buddha’s teaching. The “oneness” lies in being focused with a sense of oneness with the object. But you have to be discriminating in how you’re doing it, so if things are not going well you’ve got to figure out what might be better.

And that involves using your imagination as well—not in the sense of sitting here and daydreaming, but in the sense of exploring the possibilities for what you can do right now—thinking about what other kinds of breathing are possible, what other kinds of ways of focusing are possible. If the mind is in no mood to stay with the breath, what other topics can you think about? When you come up with a tactic, try it, put it to work, and then be very judicious in how you look at the results. If your tactic seems to be working, continue with it. If you begin to notice that it’s not really working, be willing to drop it.

Think about the Buddha when he had gone through all those years of austerities. He had tried all the austerities he’d ever heard of or could imagine, but none of them had worked. He’d lived the life of a prince in a palace with all kinds of pleasures, but *that* hadn’t worked in yielding the Deathless. You can imagine how totally lost he must have felt at that point. But then he was able to stop and think, “Well, what other alternatives are there?” He thought of the time when as a child he’d sat under a tree and his mind had settled into concentration with a sense of ease and well-being. *That* required an act of imagination, not only in memory but also in coming up with that particular memory and deciding that he wanted to try that approach next—realizing that it was the middle way between two extremes.

He’d been thinking only in extremes. And all too often, when we’re faced with issues coming up in the meditation, we tend to think in terms of one extreme or the other. We can only see a few alternatives and when we’ve exhausted those alternatives we feel pretty lost. That’s when you have to realize

that there must be other alternatives. You may be framing the issue the wrong way. Step back a bit and think about what other alternatives there might be. All of this comes under *vimansa*: your ability to analyze, your ability to play with what you're doing, to come up with other possibilities, to try them out.

And it's these qualities all together—liking the meditation: the desire to do it; the persistence: sticking with it no matter how much you do or don't want to, but knowing that deep down inside that this is what you want to do; being attentive; and using your powers of analysis: These are the things that bring success in meditation. Some people shrink from using the word, "success," in connection with meditation, for if there's success there's also failure. They don't want failure to be possible, so they define it out of existence. But there are ways of getting better results in the meditation and there are ways of missing out on the results that you could get. So think of it more in the terms of getting the most out of the meditation, exploring it to see how far it can go, using these qualities, because these are the qualities that are required.

When you stop and think about it, these qualities underlie any kind of success in any activity. You have to like to do it. You have to be persistent. You have to be attentive, to use your powers of analysis. These apply to any and all jobs. And if you're the sort of person who takes pride in doing a job well, you've already developed a lot of the psychological attitudes you need for the meditation to work well. Slapdash meditation gives only slapdash results. Meditation that's done with a sense of properly focused desire, focused on the causes of what you want; persistence; intentness, sensitivity; using your powers of analysis and imagination properly focused—that kind of meditation opens up all kinds of possibilities, brings all kinds of results that you wouldn't have gotten otherwise.

So, more than anything else, it's what you bring to the meditation that determines the results you'll get. The exercises are there. They're in the book. But in following them so that they'll get results, you have to bring these qualities, too. This is what you add to the picture; this is what you add to the equation. These qualities are what make all the difference—and that's the best thing about the practice. It depends on what you bring to it; it depends on what you give to it. This places the responsibility on you—but it also places the power in your hands.

Barriers in the Heart

March 26, 2004

A lot of our suffering and stress come from the limitations we feel in our lives. We've got this body that needs constant care, and even though we care for it, what does it do? It starts getting old, it gets ill, it finally dies, no matter how well we care for it. And it doesn't ask permission before it does any of these things. It doesn't give any warning. Then there are financial limitations, social limitations. You look around and it seems like we're getting hemmed in all the time.

I had a dream once in which I died, and the experience of death was like the world just closing in, closing in, closing in, until I had no room to stay anywhere and I had to get out. That's the way life is: It just keeps closing in, closing in – all these limitations coming from outside. And not just outside limitations: The really constraining limitations are the ones in our own minds, the ones we create for ourselves.

The good news here is that we can learn not to create them. We can learn to take down these barriers. In fact, the whole practice is one of taking down barriers, taking down limitations, even from the very beginning, the very basic levels.

Dana, or generosity: being willing to give of yourself, give of your time, give of your energy. So often the word “dana” gets hijacked for fundraising, and we think that it's mainly an issue of giving money. But it's more a giving of yourself. As you give of yourself, you get a lot in return. Ajaan Lee would say – in a typical Thai idiom – that you build goodness within yourself. And that goodness is something like yeast. It begins to expand. It breaks through barriers.

The giving of a gift is the overcoming of a barrier between people, but more importantly a barrier in your own mind: your selfishness, your tendency to say, “I can only give this much, and the rest I want to hold back.” The Thais have a phrase for the quality that comes from generosity. It can literally be translated as “heart water” or “heart juice.” *Naam jai*. That's what generosity does. It moistens a heart that's been dry, so that it starts to grow.

The same with the precepts. You're overcoming barriers in your attitudes toward what you can do, how scrupulous you can be in your behavior. This last weekend we were talking about the precepts, and getting down to a lot of the nitty-gritty about how you deal with ants in your house. There's one person in

the group who, every time this issue comes up, complains that it's getting too picayune, talking about ants. But the whole purpose of the precepts is that you want to learn to be more and more scrupulous in how you act, how you speak, how you think. The ants will benefit, and so will you. Treat your actions as skills. As with any skill ... Say you're making furniture. You want a fine finish on the furniture. You want a snug fit between the pieces of wood. And that comes from being scrupulous, *very* precise. As you learn to take the same attitude toward your life, it requires putting more energy into what you're doing so that you do it really well, in a way that's not harming anybody at all. The emphasis here is on what you put in, what you give, and in so doing you find yourself creating fewer and fewer barriers for yourself.

When you break the precepts, you're placing barriers on your life. Suppose you tell a lie. That lie then becomes something you have to carry around with you. You have to remember who you told the lie to and what the lie was. The results of that lie come to haunt you, come to place barriers on you. Whereas with the precept to tell the truth, as with all the precepts, you find you're placing fewer and fewer barriers on yourself. All you have to do is remember the truth. The world opens up. It's a much more secure place. Because you've been giving unlimited security to other people, you have a share in that unlimited security as well.

But then as you meditate, the first things you run into are more subtle barriers, literally called, "hindrances," "obstacles." And again, they're self-created, self-imposed. Sensual desire the Buddha compares to debt. Ill will he compares to a sickness or an illness. Sloth and torpor he compares to a prison. Restlessness and anxiety he compares to slavery. Uncertainty he compares to traveling across a barren, dangerous landscape.

These are all barriers that we create in our minds, so it's good to have antidotes to overcome them. One of the series of antidotes is what they call the ten recollections. These are helpful in providing an expansive sense of heart that can help overcome its limitations. Because what the limitations basically come from is this: We want to get pleasure and then that desire is thwarted. So we respond with anger or boredom or restlessness and anxiety or with uncertainty. To get beyond the limitations of these reactions, we've got to look at that "getting" attitude and remind ourselves of the giving attitude that's been nourishing our hearts all along.

This is why one of the recollections is recollection of your own generosity, recollection of your own virtue – the times when you gave of yourself. That helps to nourish the mind. When the mind is well nourished, it's not interested in picking up those obstacles and making them into bigger obstacles than they have to be. When you remind yourself of the happiness that comes from giving, the

interest in gaining sensual pleasures and feeding on sensual pleasures gets lessened. When it's lessened, you find yourself less irritable, less bored, less restless, less uncertain. This is one of the many techniques available for dealing with the hindrances.

Specifically with sensual desire, you can start thinking about what exactly it is that you're desiring so much. And then take a good careful look at the object of your desire, especially if it's sexual desire. Look first at your own body. What's it made out of? What have you got here of any real worth, that's really all that attractive? Take all the pieces apart and what is there? Nothing much. In fact when you start getting into the inner parts, it's positively repulsive. And yet we all find it so easy to turn a blind eye to that. When you look with open eyes, you realize that the object itself is not all that attractive. But then the problem is not so much the object; it's the mind's willingness to close its eyes and make believe.

Ajaan Suwat once made an interesting comment. There's the word *sañña*, which we usually translate as "perception" or "mental label." But in Thai it also means an agreement, a contract. When you look carefully at the way your mind works, you find that it keeps making agreements with itself to turn a blind eye to things, to put up barriers so that it can't see the full story, so that it can focus on what it wants to focus on. Whether it wants to focus on attractive things as a basis of lust or on disagreeable things as a basis for anger, there's a willingness to play a game with itself. This is one of the mind's biggest limitations. This game-playing is what gets us wound up in sensual desires, irritation, ill will, restlessness and anxiety. There's even a part of the mind that's willing to go along with sloth and torpor and uncertainty if it sees that there's pleasure that can come from these things.

The Buddha says that the hindrances are fed by inappropriate attention, which means that when they come along we're willing to play along with them. We're willing to forget about the truths of suffering and stress so that we can get a little immediate gratification. That's what we've got to deal with. Look at the state of mind that wants to get involved in sensual desire, that wants to feed on anger, find satisfaction in anger and ill will, that's happy to see sloth and torpor come along: "Oh, here we are. The meditation's not working; better give up." Try to see the part of the mind that's playing along here, the part that feels that something really useful is being done when it's restless and anxious, the part that likes to be thwarted with uncertainty.

It sounds strange, but there *is* a part of human psychology that takes satisfaction in these hindrances—which is why the hindrances don't just happen to be there. We're playing along with them. We're feeding them. We're creating them. We're throwing up barriers against whatever would thwart our playing around with the hindrances because we feel comfortable within those barriers—

or at least we think we do. They're familiar, and the idea of taking them down seems a little bit threatening. More will be demanded of us. But when you stop to take a really good look at what you've got here, you see that you've placed limitations on the mind's true potential. They put a squeeze on the mind.

So try to learn how to think in more expansive ways. This is why we start out every evening with a chant on goodwill: goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for all beings without limitation, compassion for all, appreciation and empathetic joy for all, equanimity for all, without exception. Try to keep these thoughts as unlimited as possible. Let them stretch your mind, and then try to live within those attitudes. They're called *brahma-viharas*. "Vihara" means dwelling. It's not just something that you visit for a few minutes and then forget about. Ajaan Mun would practice these three times a day. Everyday when he'd wake up he'd spread thoughts of goodwill to all beings. After his midday nap, goodwill for all beings. Before he went to sleep at night, goodwill for all beings. These practices formed the background of his meditation.

So try to develop this more unlimited attitude – which comes through being generous, through being virtuous – as a background for your meditation, as a foundation for your meditation, because it teaches you that true happiness comes through overcoming these barriers by giving of yourself. When you come to the meditation with that attitude of giving, you find that the meditation is a much more expansive place to be, a much more expansive process, so you can work on the more refined barriers we have in the mind: the I-making and my-making that place a limitation on ourselves as well. All the various forms of clinging, everything that we cling to, becomes a barrier, becomes a limitation. As the Buddha said, we define ourselves by what we cling to. And that becomes our limitation, our measure, as he says.

It's in learning how to let go of those very subtle levels of clinging that the limitations are dropped, and then nobody can define us at all. We can't define ourselves. Nobody else can define us. As the texts say: You can't even be traced. The path you follow can't be traced either. Nobody can track you down. Total freedom. That's the direction we're heading in. But the paradox here is that total freedom comes not from trying to *get* total freedom, but by giving of yourself. Because what is yourself? It's a lot of limitations. By letting go of these limitations, you let go of barriers.

That's why the path to the cessation of suffering, the cessation of stress, is not just a mental exercise. It's an exercise of the heart as well. In fact, the limitations we place on the heart probably feel a lot more confining than the ones we place on our minds, if you want to make a distinction between the two. But what it comes down to is that there are limitations on both that we have to overcome. That's why the practice is a whole practice, not just one technique. It's a whole

practice of overcoming those barriers on this heart and mind to the point where you can no longer define the heart and mind at all.

Willing to Learn

December 29, 2004

As the Buddha once said, suffering usually results in one of two things, often both: One is bewilderment and the other is a search outside for someone who might know a way to get rid of the suffering.

This starts from our childhood. We're hungry and we look to our mother. We have this problem, that problem, and we look to our parents, our siblings, our friends—anybody who might have some idea of how to overcome whatever suffering or stress is bothering us. Because that search for outside advice is accompanied by bewilderment, we often look in the wrong places, take the wrong advice, which of course just leads to more and more suffering.

Now the solution to this, the Buddha says, is not that we shouldn't listen to anybody's advice. That's not what he was advising at all. Even that famous passage from the Kalama Sutta that everybody seems to think advises you to go by your own sense of right and wrong: That's not what it says. It starts out by saying, "Don't go by scriptures, don't go by reports," but this doesn't mean to reject these things. It simply means that you can't absolutely trust them as your authority.

But then he also says, "Don't go by your own sense of what seems reasonable," because that's not always right, either. When you see for yourself that a certain pattern of action leads to suffering for yourself or for others, and that it's also criticized by the wise, then you drop it. As for something that doesn't lead to suffering for yourself or other people, a path of action that's praised by the wise, that's something you can follow.

So he's advising a combination of seeing for yourself in your own actions and also developing a good sense of who's wise and who isn't—in other words, learning to look for the right people to listen to. When you meet the right person, like the Buddha, where does he point? He points right back to your own experience. The four noble truths. What do these truths talk about, if they're not talking about things that you already have inside you? You already have suffering and stress, you already have craving, and to some extent you have the elements of the path, the end of suffering and stress.

So we need these four noble truths to remind us of where we really ought to look. And they include pointers as to what you're supposed to do with each of these truths. Suffering is something you should try to comprehend—which is not

our immediate reaction to it. Our immediate reaction is to push it away, or to try to run away from it in the midst of all of our bewilderment and search. But the Buddha says, “Try to comprehend it,” which means that you have to sit down and look at it.

Now, to look at it requires some strength of mind, and strength of mind needs help. That’s what the path is all about. It develops the factors in the mind that can help put you in a position where you can really comprehend the suffering and stress: factors like mindfulness, alertness, skillful intentions, skillful understanding. We all already have these qualities to some extent, simply that they’re not developed. We have to work on them.

And that’s the important issue. Who does the work? We have to do our own work. That right there is a lesson that many of us don’t like to hear. We like the idea that we can be the authorities on what is ultimately right and wrong, what ultimately works and doesn’t work, but we don’t like to be told that we have to work more, or that we have to be the ones who are responsible for the results of the work. We’re always looking for somebody outside to be responsible: “Something is wrong with the teacher. I’ve got to find another teacher.” “Can’t practice in America, got to go some place else.” “Don’t like this, don’t like that.”

These likes and dislikes get in our way. We use them to justify not really looking at ourselves or seeing where we’re still lacking. Sometimes the ideas we hold to most strongly are the ones where we’re most stupid.

That’s a word Ajaan Suwat used to like use a lot. His translation for *avijja*, which ordinarily is translated as ignorance, was “stupidity.” We hold on to ideas even though they have proven themselves again and again and again that they don’t work. It’s like that famous story about Nasrudin eating a whole bushel full of peppers and crying. Someone asked him, “Why do you keep eating peppers when they make you cry?” And he responded, “Because I’m looking for the sweet one.” For a lot of us, that’s our attitude to life. We keep trying the same old things over and over again, even though they’ve never worked. We keep looking for the sweet pepper, even though we’ve never found one. We keep looking outside for help—and the Buddha offers help—but his way of helping is to tell you to turn around and do the work yourself.

We’re not sitting here waiting for some vision to come, or some Bodhisattva to come down to tell us what to do. We have to figure out what to do on our own. Again, the Buddha gives help, he gives pointers, but figuring out exactly when to use which dhamma teaching: That’s something we have to learn how to observe for ourselves.

So the principles are all laid out. If you see in yourself any habits that are causing stress and suffering, you work to let go of them. Or any mental states that

you know will cause stress and suffering if they arise, you work not to give rise to them. You try to prevent them from happening. As for skillful states that lead to clarity of knowledge, if they're not there in your mind or if they're weak, you try to give rise to them. If they're there already, you try to strengthen them. Try to develop a sense of desire, persistence, intentness in doing this. People outside can give pep talks, they can give pointers, but you are the one who actually has to do the work.

So you have to be observant. This is one of the most important principles in the Buddha's teaching: that you have to be willing to learn, that you have to learn how to learn. Most of us are pretty poor at that. In school, we were handed all sorts of information. If we didn't understand it, it was the teacher's fault. That seems to be the attitude of a lot of people. But as a meditator, you have to develop the willingness and the desire to learn new things. Try things out, look at what works, look at what doesn't work. When things don't work, don't let yourself get depressed or down. When things work well, don't let yourself get too careless. You've got to develop an even mind about these things as you experiment. Otherwise, you want your meditation to gratify your sense of ego, and then when it doesn't, you don't like it. In either case, the gratification of the ego becomes the important issue, and not the actual learning of something new.

How does this breath meditation work? How can you get yourself to sit for longer periods of time? How can you deal with this particular defilement in the mind? These are some of the things you want to learn. If one approach doesn't work, you don't let yourself get discouraged. You try another one. Learn how to develop your ingenuity in coming up with new approaches. Again, the teachings of the Buddha, the teachings of the forest masters, give all kinds of advice. But they keep reminding you that you're going to have to work out the details yourself. There's no magic bullet that's going to solve all of your problems. Sometimes a particular approach works in getting the mind to settle down, and the next day it doesn't. This shows that the mind is in a different state, requires a different approach.

The same with trying to develop insight. Today one approach will work in developing insight into a particular kind of suffering, and then tomorrow it won't work at all, which shows that the suffering is a little bit different this time. After all, dependent co-arising has all kinds of pathways through which suffering can arise. So there's no way that one technique is going to cover them all.

But that's not really a problem. What makes it a problem is our desire to have one approach that's going to cure everything, that's going to solve all of our problems forever, and we won't have to think again. That's not the attitude of a meditator. A meditator develops whatever qualities are needed to lead to new learning. Once you have those qualities, you're happy to use them.

It's like developing any skill. The more you master the skill, the more you enjoy putting it to use in all kinds of new areas, playing with it, experimenting with it, seeing what has to be adjusted and what doesn't. Even arahants, after they've taken care of the problem of suffering, are still willing to learn about other things in the course of teaching other people how to find the way. Even though the issue of their suffering is solved, and they're not creating any more suffering, they see that other people are still suffering and so they try to figure out ways to help them. That's their attitude.

So try to work on the qualities that give rise to new knowledge. Learn how to be more and more self-reliant in this way. When you can do that, then there's no longer the issue of whether you're in the right place to meditate or not, or whether you're with the right teacher or in the right situation. You simply realize that those elements were not the problem at all. The problem was an inner lack of willingness to really sit down and watch and learn, to chip away at your own stupidity, to chip away at the things that you sometimes believe most strongly, are most strongly attached to. "It's got to be this way": That's what the clinging mind says. And sometimes that's precisely the problem: your unwillingness to look at other alternatives. That stubbornness is what you've got to unlearn.

Even though the Buddha is willing to give as much help as he can, there's only so much help that even a Buddha can give. We look outside for advice on how to put an end to suffering, hoping to find somebody else to take care of the problem for us, but the Buddha just points you back to yourself again. Still, he gives us the tools—his instructions on the four noble truths. Try to comprehend the suffering, he says. When you see the craving and the ignorance that underlie the suffering, try to let go. Develop the qualities of mind—whatever's needed in terms of concentration or insight—so that you can really look at suffering long and hard. Look at stress long and hard to see what's causing it. Look at each instance. Even if you don't find the one thing that's going to get rid of all suffering—the big block, the huge abstraction of suffering—work on your individual sufferings, your individual instances of stress, the individual desires, the individual cravings, work on them one by one. Don't be so self-important that you can't deal with the details.

Realize that these things don't come all at once in all their fullness. There will be an individual desire, an individual instance of stress. Well, you learn from the individual pieces, the individual instances. Over time you begin to detect patterns that you wouldn't have seen if you weren't willing to look carefully.

So when there's pain in the body, learn how to sit with it. Try to figure out what way you can sit with it so that the mind doesn't suffer. This will require concentration. It'll require insight. It'll require the right attitudes, the attitudes that you've developed through the other elements of the path as well, through

being generous and virtuous: generous in learning how to give up certain things, virtuous in learning how to refrain from certain types of activity. In this case, you learn how to give up certain ways of thinking, refrain from certain ways of thinking. That in and of itself helps an awful lot. Translate the skills of generosity and virtue into meditative skills. Then work on the more refined skills that come from just sitting here with the pain, sitting here with the stress in the mind, and realizing that the physical pain doesn't have to stress the mind. You're doing something wrong if you let it stress the mind. It's not that you're doing something wrong that causes the pain, but there's something wrong in the way you relate to it that causes the suffering.

Try to see that fact in each instance of suffering in the mind, and after a while you'll begin to see the larger patterns. Ultimately, as the Buddha says, you'll reach a point where you've comprehended the whole thing, the whole problem of suffering at the same time that you've let go of all of the causes of suffering. You've developed the path to its total fullness. That's the end of the search.

But even though that particular search is ended, you've still got the tools that you used to overcome your own problems. Now you can use them—to whatever extent you have energy and time—to help show other people how they can start developing their own tools, too.

So what it comes down to is always being willing to learn, developing the tools you need to learn. Develop skill in using them and then learn to enjoy figuring out how to keep on using them, whatever the situation. That's the attitude that'll see you through.

The Reality Principle

April 14, 2006

Those five reflections we chanted just now: We're subject to aging, illness, death, and separation, yet we have kamma as our refuge. Actually that's only a part of the contemplation that the Buddha recommended. He also said to go on to think about the fact that all beings—men, women, children, lay or ordained, past, future, no matter what their level of being—are subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, separation, and have kamma as their refuge.

The two sides of the contemplation are meant to produce two different reactions. The one we chanted just now: That's to make you realize that you've got to get your act in order, to straighten out your life—because what you do makes all the difference in the world.

The second side of the recollection, though, is to give you more of a sense of *samvega*: a sense of dismay over the nature of the human condition, to expand your perspective—first, to look for a way out; and second, to get a larger sense of compassion, realizing that *everybody* is subject to these same problems. This gets you thinking in terms of the sublime abidings, the brahmaviharas: limitless goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity, not just for your friends and family, but for everybody—because everybody is subject to these same problems.

And it's not just that we're *subject* to aging, illness and death. The Thai translation of this passage is interesting. It says, "Aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal." We forget about that, so it's good to expand your perspective to realize how normal these things are.

There's the famous story of the woman whose child had died and she couldn't accept the fact that it was dead. She went around asking people for medicine for her "sick" child, so people sent her to the Buddha. And the Buddha told her that it would be possible to make a medicine for the child, but it had to be made out of mustard seeds. Well, mustard seeds are easy. Those are the cheapest things you could find in India. But, he added, it had to be from mustard seeds from a family where there had never been a death.

So she went from house to house to house asking for mustard seeds. Everybody was willing to give her mustard seeds, but when she added the condition they'd say, "Oh no, we've had a death. My mother's died, my father's died, my grandparents, aunts, uncles, children had died." Ultimately it hit home

—that her child was dead. She was willing to accept it because she realized this was a normal part of the human condition.

If we had a decent education system, it would teach us how to deal with aging, illness, and death, but we don't have much training in that. Our education system is designed to make us producers and consumers, and the skills we develop in that direction are not necessarily good for the mind, not necessarily helpful for dealing with aging, illness, and death when they come. This is what the Buddha's training is all about. You go to a monastery in Thailand and that's the first thing you hear: We're all subject to aging, illness and death, and the lesson is how to learn not to suffer in the face of these things. We're all subject to separation: How do we not suffer in the face of that? Those are the real issues.

This where the teaching on equanimity is important. It's the brahmavihara that helps prevent the other brahmaviharas from causing us to suffer. We want all living beings to be happy. We see that some are suffering and we want to help them. Sometimes we can, but often we can't. That's where equanimity has to come in, to put your mind in a larger frame of reference: that we're all subject to our actions. So the question is: What can you do? Equanimity does *not* teach there's nothing you can do. It simply points out the areas where you can't do anything so that you can focus on the areas where you can, where you can be of help.

It's basically a reality principle. Notice in the statements for the four brahmaviharas: The first three start out, "May all beings be happy. May they not be deprived. May they be released from stress and suffering." It's, "May, may, may." It's a wish. But equanimity is the reality principle: "All beings are the owners of their actions." There's no "may" in there at all. It's just a statement of fact. So you take that as your foundation for looking to see where you can be of help, both in terms of your own suffering and the suffering of other people. Then you can act accordingly. That's when you can actually be helpful. One of the principles of equanimity is simply to accept the fact that aging, illness, death, and separation are normal. The question is how not to suffer around these things. That's something you can do something about.

You know the teaching about the man shot with one arrow who then shoots himself with another arrow. The first arrow is the pain that comes with having a body, having a mind. These things are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. That's the first arrow—when pain comes up. But then there's the second arrow—and it's not just one more arrow. Often it's hundreds of arrows that we shoot ourselves with as we get all wound up around the suffering—*those* are not necessary. And those are the ones that really cause suffering, really place a big burden of the mind. If we didn't have those other arrows, the first arrow on its own wouldn't reach the mind. Our misunderstandings, our tendency to get all

upset around the suffering: Those are the arrows that really hurt, based on craving and ignorance. So those are the ones we want to learn how not to shoot ourselves with, because when we stop shooting ourselves with those, then there's no suffering at all.

So you have to sit down and face the fact of aging, illness, and death. These things are inevitable. We haven't gotten past them. So what do you do? The Buddha says there are four reasons why death scares us, has us in fear. One is attachment to the body. The second is attachment to sensual pleasures. The third is the knowledge that we've done cruel and harmful things to other people, to other beings, and the fear that after death we're going to be punished for it. And then the fourth is not having seen the true dhamma, having doubts about the true dhamma.

Now if we can learn to overcome these four fears of death, death won't bring suffering. And only when we've got a handle on these things can we really be helpful to other people. This doesn't mean that you have *totally* overcome the fear, but if you learn to deal with your fear of death so that it doesn't freak you out, then you can help other people as they approach death, too.

So this is why this is not a selfish training. It really does put you in a better position to be of help if you've sorted through your attachments to the body, sorted through your attachments to sensual pleasures, learned to focus on the positive things you've done, realizing that punishment for the bad things is not necessarily inevitable. It's even better if you gain a dhamma-eye, a vision of the true dhamma. That's when you can totally overcome your fear of death, when you can really be helpful to other people. But this doesn't mean you have to wait until that point.

Take this issue of being afraid of the harmful things you've done in the past. The Buddha says that it's not inevitable you're going to have to suffer from them. He gives the analogy of a lump of salt: Say you've got a lump of salt the size of your fist and you put it into a glass of water. You can't drink the water because it's much too salty. But if you find a large clean river and throw the lump of salt into the river, you can still drink the water because the salt gets so diluted by the quantity of the water. That's an analogy for a mind that's developed the four brahmaviharas. When you develop these limitless qualities of mind, and the mind becomes very expansive. And it's the nature of such a mind that the results of past bad actions don't have such an impact. They don't impinge on the mind as much.

So this is one very good reason to develop these qualities of mind: When the results of past bad actions come, they don't hit you as hard. And you can train other people who are ill or close to death in the same skill. Get them to develop this larger, more compassionate, more equanimous state of mind. You can start

by reminding them of their generosity: the good things they've done for other people in the past, the bad things they've avoided doing. These are forms of generosity. These are forms of compassion and goodwill because they open up the mind and make it more expansive. When the mind is in a more expansive state, the amount of suffering grows less.

So it's good to develop these qualities in the mind. One way of developing them is to learn how to develop the same attitudes toward your breathing. Have goodwill towards your breathing, compassion, appreciation, equanimity for your breathing. In other words, allow the breath to be comfortable so you can have a foundation. Where it's not comfortable, work at making it more comfortable: That's compassion. Where it is comfortable, appreciate it. Sometimes, especially in the very beginning, the states of comfort seem to be very minor and not impressive at all, but that doesn't mean they don't have the potential to become more impressive with time. You've got to give them a little space. It's like oak trees: When they first come out of the ground, they're pretty small—a little tiny acorn. Of an even better analogy is a coastal redwood tree, which has the tiniest little seeds, and yet the tallest trees on earth come from these tiny, tiny seeds. Develop the conditions, allow them to grow, and they become a huge forest.

It's the same with the sense of wellbeing in the body. First find areas that are simply not in pain, that seem okay. That's good enough. And then be very careful to keep them okay. Don't let the way you breathe push, or pull, or squeeze them in any way at all. Just let them *be* all right continuously, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. They'll begin to grow, to develop a sense of fullness. And then you can allow that sense of fullness to expand through whatever parts of the body pick it up.

As for equanimity, when there are areas that you can't improve, develop equanimity for them. Focus instead on the areas where you can make a difference. Don't get worked up over the things you can't improve, because that gets in the way of seeing where you can make a difference, where you can be of help. Once you get practice in developing these attitudes toward the breath in your own body, it's a lot easier to develop the same attitudes toward other people because you're coming from a sense of wellbeing inside. You realize that no matter how bad things get outside, you've still got a safe place inside where you can go. And from that position you can see more clearly what needs to be done, and you have the strength to do it. So reflecting on the nature of the world, trying to develop these qualities—partly as your own protection so that you don't have to suffer more than is necessary, and secondly so you can help other people—you put yourself in a better position to be of help, because you're coming from a position of strength and wellbeing.

This is just one of the most basic lessons you need to learn in what would be

a decent education—learning how to deal with aging, illness, death and separation. And fortunately even though they don't give us much of an education like this at school, we can educate ourselves.

Mindfulness Defined

April 20, 2006

What does it mean to be mindful of the breath? Something very simple: keep the breath in mind. Keep remembering the breath each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out. The standard translation for *sati*—mindfulness—is probably derived from the passage in the Anglican Prayer Book that says, “Be ever mindful of the needs of others.” In other words keep their needs in mind. Even though the word “mindful” may come from Christianity, it’s the closest we can get in English to what *sati* means in the Pali Canon: keeping something in mind. So, be ever mindful of the breath.

As for watching the breath, or accepting the breath, or whatever else we’re told mindfulness is supposed to be doing: Those are actually other qualities in the mind. They’re not automatically a part of mindfulness, but you want to bring them along wherever they’re appropriate.

One quality that’s always appropriate is being watchful or alert. The word for alertness is *sampajañña*: being alert to what you’re doing, alert to the results of what you’re doing. These two qualities—keeping something in mind and being alert to what that thing is doing or how you’re relating to that thing—should always be paired as you meditate.

In the discourse on establishing the frames of reference, these two qualities are combined with a third quality: *atappa*, or ardency. You really stick with what you’re doing. You put effort into it. This doesn’t mean that you have to sit here straining and sweating. It means that you’re continuous in your effort. You don’t let things drop. Psychologists have shown that moments of attention are just that: moments. You can be attentive to something for only a very short period of time, then you have to consciously return to it if you want to keep on being attentive to it, again and again. This means that you need to keep remembering to stitch those moments of attention together, from moment to moment to moment. That’s what mindfulness is for. It’s what keeps the object of your attention in mind. Whatever your frame of reference—the body, the breath—that’s all mindfulness has to do.

But if you look through modern books on meditation, you see a lot of other definitions for mindfulness, a lot of other things it’s supposed to do. The poor word gets totally stretched out of shape. And this is not just a matter for nitpicking scholars to argue over, because if you don’t see the different qualities

you're bringing to your meditation and don't understand the differences among them, they all get glommed together. That makes it difficult for real insight to arise as to what's going on, as to what you're actually doing with the meditation.

I've heard of mindfulness defined as "sacred presence." I've heard it defined as "affectionate attention" or "compassionate attention." Actually, though, affection and compassion are separate qualities. They're not mindfulness. If you translate them into the Buddha's vocabulary, they mean goodwill. That's a good quality to bring to the meditation, but be clear about the fact that it's acting in addition to mindfulness, for an important part of meditation lies in seeing when things like this are helpful and when they're not. As the Buddha says, there are times when affection is a cause for suffering, so you have to watch out.

Sometimes mindfulness is defined as appreciating the moment for whatever pleasure it can offer. In the Buddha's vocabulary, that's contentment. Contentment is useful in areas where you're experiencing physical difficulties, but it's not always useful in the area of the mind. In fact, there's a passage where the Buddha said that the secret to his Awakening was that he *didn't* allow himself to rest content with whatever attainment he had reached. He kept reaching for something higher until there was nowhere higher to reach. So contentment has to know its time and place. Mindfulness, if it's not glommed together with contentment, can help keep that fact in mind.

Sometimes mindfulness is defined as "total acceptance" or "radical acceptance." In the Buddha's vocabulary, acceptance equals equanimity and patience. Equanimity means learning to put aside your preferences and just watch what's actually there. Patience is the ability to stick with things even when the results don't come as quickly as you'd like them to. But in the context of the Buddha's training, you put up with unpleasant things not just to endure them or to accept them, but to watch them. You realize that if you react too quickly to things—throwing things away when you don't get results as fast as you want—you never understand anything, never gain any results that are lasting. So patience and equanimity are needed to see things clearly. But once you've clearly seen that a particular quality is harmful for the mind, you can't remain patient or equanimous about it. You exert whatever effort is needed to get rid of it and to nourish skillful qualities in its place. That means you're bringing in other factors of the path: right resolve and right effort.

As we're meditating we're combining all kinds of qualities of the mind, and you have to be clear about what they are and where they're separate. That way, when you notice that things are out of balance, you can identify what's missing and can foster whatever is needed to make up the lack. It's not just a matter of just piling in more and more and more mindfulness. You've got to add other qualities as well. First you're mindful enough to stitch things together, to keep

the basic issue of your meditation in mind. Then you watch – that’s alertness – to see what else is needed.

It’s like cooking. It’s not the case that if you don’t like the taste of the soup you’re fixing you just add more and more and more salt. Sometimes you’ve got to add onion, sometimes garlic, sometimes oregano—whatever you sense is needed. Keep in mind the fact that you’ve got a whole spice shelf to work with. And you don’t want every bottle on the shelf to be labeled salt. You want to know precisely what the contents of each bottle are.

That’s why it’s good to read the Buddha’s teachings. Some people make a virtue out of ignorance, saying that if you read a lot of the texts it just clutters up your mind. There may be times when that *is* the problem, but other times the problem is that your ideas about what can be done in the meditation are too narrow. When that’s the case, reading the texts can open your eyes and expand the range of your imagination.

For instance, there’s the old issue of the relationship between mindfulness and concentration practice. The Buddha never made a clear division between the two. In his teachings, mindfulness shades into concentration, and concentration forms the basis for even better mindfulness. The fourth jhana is where mindfulness becomes pure. The four frames of reference, the focal points of mindfulness, are also the themes of concentration. As Ajaan Lee notes, when mindfulness—the ability to keep something in mind—grows stronger, it becomes the jhana factor called *vitakka* or directed thought, where you really keep your thoughts focussed on one thing consistently. As for alertness, it provides the foundation for another jhana factor: *vicara*, or evaluation. You notice what’s going on with the breath: Is the breath comfortable? You can make it more comfortable if you like—a little bit longer, a little bit shorter, deeper, more shallow, faster, slower. When you’ve found a way of breathing that’s comfortable, you can spread that sense of comfort throughout the body. That makes it easier for the mind to become one with the breath.

Meditation is not just a passive process of being present with whatever’s there and not changing it at all. Mindfulness keeps stitching things together over time, but it also keeps in mind the idea that you want to be able to settle down here. There’s a purpose to mindfulness practice. It’s meant to lead to concentration, from there to discernment, and from there to release. That’s how its role is always portrayed in the texts. So you do what you can to make the breath a place where you can stay concentrated, where the mind can feel more and more at home. In this way, evaluation is an important part of the practice: getting a sense of what’s pleasing to the mind, and adjusting things so that it’s happy to settle down.

You can play with the breath, remembering that the breath isn’t just the movement of air coming in and out. It’s also the entire energy flow in the body.

For the purpose of concentration, it's good to get sensitive to that—the energy flow in your legs, the energy flow in your arms, in your torso, in your neck, your shoulders, all around your face, your eyes, your ears. When you breathe in, where do the currents of energy flow? Think of the body not as a bellows that pulls air in and pushes it out. Think of it as an energy field that exchanges energy through every pore with the energy field of the world around it. Notice which sensations indicate where the energy is blocked, which areas of the body seem starved for breath. You can feed them, you know. Make a survey: Which part of the body doesn't seem to participate much in the energy flow? Let it participate for a couple of breaths and then see which other part needs to be nourished. It's like feeding a flock of chickens: You throw a little scrap of bread to this one, a little scrap to that one, until all the chickens are well fed.

This not only makes the present a more comfortable place to be, but it also gives the mind something to do so that it's not bored. If you can get interested in the breath, that interest can grow into absorption—in other words, jhana.

There's a lot to discover in the present moment. Insight doesn't come from being non-reactive, from simply by putting up with whatever is there. It comes from testing, experimenting. This is how we learn about the world to begin with. If we weren't active creatures, we'd have no understanding of the world at all. Things would pass by, pass by, and we wouldn't know how they were connected because we wouldn't have any way of influencing them to see which effects came from changing which causes. It's because we act in the world that we know about the world.

The same holds true with the mind. You can't just sit around radically accepting everything. If you're going to learn about the mind, you have to be willing to play—to play with qualities in the mind, to play with sensations in the body. That's when you begin to understand cause and effect. You begin to understand the principle of intention. What role does intention play in your experience? It goes a lot deeper and is more fundamental than anything you might have imagined. Your whole experience of space and time is based on certain intentions that are repeatedly being made on a very subtle level.

To see these things in action, you have to be willing to experiment in your meditation. That involves the desire to do it, persistence, keeping at it, being really intent, focused on what you're doing, and using your ingenuity: using all of your powers of intelligence. This doesn't mean book intelligence. It means your ability to notice what you're doing, to read the results of what you've done, and to figure out ways of doing things that get better and better results: street smarts for the noble path. Mindfulness allows you to see these connections because it keeps reminding you to stay with these issues with every moment, to stay with the causes until you see their effects. But mindfulness alone can't do all

the work. You can't fix the soup simply by dumping more salt into it. You add other ingredients, as they're needed.

Sometimes what you need in the meditation isn't what you expected. That's where alertness shades into evaluation, and evaluation into ingenuity. As Ajaan Lee says, evaluation is the quality that leads to discernment. We're training the whole mind, so we need a whole range of mental qualities to complete the training.

Mindfulness is where things start, but it can't do all the work. It needs other qualities to help it. As you realize that, it helps expand your imagination about what you can do here, what tactics you might try. That's why it's best not to load the one word mindfulness with too many meanings or to assign it too many functions. If it carries too many meanings, you can't clearly discern when you need to see the difference between, say, what goodwill does and what equanimity does, when you need one and don't need the other.

So even though mindfulness combined with alertness is said to be the most helpful quality in the mind, it too needs help. This means that you have to gain a clear sense of what you have on your spice shelf, and which spice is good for which purpose. Only then can you develop your full potential as a cook.

Chew Your Food Well

June 24, 2006

The mind has a habit of feeding on things. And for the most part its feeding habits are pretty bad. It feeds on all the wrong things and it suffers as a result. Like a person who just takes anything at all and stuffs it in his mouth: He's sure to damage his digestive system and his body as a whole.

But the feeding of the mind is much more complex than the feeding of the body. The mind tries to feed on sensual things, but they don't give any satisfaction. It tries to feed on becoming this or becoming that, and whatever it becomes doesn't last very long. Then it gets all disgusted with the whole thing and wants to destroy everything, so it feeds on the idea of destruction. When it doesn't have anything left, it has to start all over from scratch because it still needs to feed. It hasn't gotten over the need to fill the big gaping hole it feels inside. Part of the Buddha's genius was to realize that there are other ways of feeding the mind, skillful ways that bring it to the point where it doesn't need to feed anymore. That's what the path is all about: It's a different way to feed.

The word for feeding and clinging are actually the same in the Pali: *upadana*, the things you cling to as sustenance for the mind. And basically what the Buddha has us do in the path is to take our old habits of feeding and apply them in new ways. We still hold on for a while, we still cling for a while, but it's not quite the same as the clinging that causes us to suffer. In other words, we don't hold on to these things as ends in and of themselves. We hold on to them as a path, as tools.

The Buddha allows for a certain amount of sensual pleasure on the path. He tells you look at your practice: If you see that when you indulge in certain pleasures it doesn't harm the mind, then they're okay. Some sensual pleasures, he says, are out of bounds. They can't be skillful by any stretch of the imagination. But in other cases, it really depends on the individual: Some people find that they can meditate perfectly well in busy surroundings, whereas other people have to go off and live in the forest. Some people find that they can eat a nice moderate diet without any problem, while other people practically have to starve themselves. It's really an individual matter. But even when you starve yourself, the Buddha doesn't have you totally starve yourself. It simply means that you eat less than you normally might like—for, after all, the body does need food to keep going.

The same with the other forms of clinging, such as attachment to views: As the Buddha points out, there's right view. Right view starts as an understanding about kamma. And it's interesting to note that when the Buddha talks about kamma, the first two things he focuses on are gratitude and generosity. If you don't see the virtue, the value of gratitude, if you don't see the value of generosity, it's hard to do anything else on the path. You have to appreciate the good that other people have done for you, and see that something really good does come from being generous. Generosity is not a sham. It's one of the things that makes life worth living. If you don't appreciate the good that other people have done for you, the ways they've been generous, how are you going to be generous yourself? How are you going to be a good person? This is why the Buddha has you reflect on generosity and gratitude as the very basis for any kind of practice.

From that point, right view moves on to an understanding about suffering: why we suffer, how we suffer, what we can do to put an end to suffering. That kind of view is a useful tool because its very nature is not to be taken as an end in and of itself. It's a means to put an end to suffering. It's a good view to feed on, a good view to apply as a tool.

The same with clinging to habit and practices: The Buddha wasn't just talking about rituals. Any type of practice, any type of precept, any kind of habit, if you take it as an end in and of itself, is a kind of clinging and therefore suffering. But in the path of practice, we have precepts, we have practices, we develop good habits: You practice concentration, you maintain the precepts, as means to an end because these kinds of precepts and practices really do nourish the mind. They strengthen you. If you know that under no circumstances would you ever kill, under no circumstances would you ever steal, there's a very strong sense of self-worth that comes from that knowledge. If someone were to come and offer you a million dollars to lie and yet you could say no, that means you've got a precept that's worth more than a million dollars. A great sense of self value comes with that, and that's an important food for the mind. It really strengthens the mind to have a precept, to have a practice like that.

And even views of the self. The Buddha doesn't have you totally drop any view of what you are or of what kind of self you've got. You can create a sense of self as a strategy in lots of skillful or unskillful ways, and he recommends the skillful ones. Being generous, being virtuous, following the path, meditating: These require a sense of self that's responsible, a sense of self that can practice deferred gratification. Then when that sense of self has taken you as far as it can—you realize it's a strategy and there are times when that strategy doesn't work—you drop it and move beyond it. But again, we need that kind of strategy to get anywhere on the path.

So the Buddha teaches you to hold on to things as part of the path. The image he has is of a raft. You use the raft to get across the river. When you've gotten across the river, you don't need the raft anymore. But while you're still on the river, you need the raft. Otherwise you drown. So make sure that this raft you're taking here is well lashed together. This is why we spend so much time practicing the concentration—because it's the centerpiece of the path. Only by holding onto a good state of concentration can you get across the river.

So, where's your concentration right now? How do you develop it? You give the mind something good to focus on, like the breath. If the breath isn't enough, you can add the word "bud-dho" together with the breath: "bud" with the in-breath; "dho" with the out. Buddhho means "awake." No matter what else happens—there may be the sound of traffic or music off in the distance, or pains in your legs, or whatever—don't let that deter you. Don't let that distract you. Just stay here with the breath. Those other things don't really destroy the breath. Even though there may be noises off in the distance, you've still got the breath right here. It's simply your choice: Where are you going to focus your attention? Focus it on something good. Focus on eating good food, not on junk food.

And do your best to give yourself a good foundation. Of all the different elements of the path, concentration is the one the Buddha most often compares to food: a sense of stillness, a sense of well-being that you can create here in the present moment. It is a creation, it is something put together—which means that it's not the goal of our striving, but it certainly is the path to that goal.

So just stay with the breath. *Feel* the breath and the process of breathing. Where do you feel it? Where do you notice it? Where can you see most vividly: "Now the breath is coming in; now the breath is going out"? Well, focus right there. And then allow that part of the body to feel comfortable. You may notice that at the end of a breath it tends to feel squeezed or strained. That's a sign that the breath is too long. If you've been breathing in and don't quite feel full, allow the breath to get longer. Learn to experiment. What feels good right now? What feels right for the body right now? What feels right for the mind? That makes the breath a lot more interesting—and more useful as well. If you can create a sense of well-being in the present moment, it's lot easier to stay here for the whole hour.

As you settle down with the breath, you begin to notice other parts of the body as well. You begin to realize that the whole body can be involved in the breathing process. There's energy throughout the whole body. So make a survey of the body to see where there's tension: Is there any tension related to the in-breath? Are you holding on to tension with the out-breath? Where? In your hands? In your feet? Well, let them relax.

You're working on your raft here, so make sure that it's a good raft. You

don't want it to fall apart in mid-stream. Have some pride in your workmanship. The more attention you pay to the breath, the more you can feed off it, the more solid your foundation is, then the more trustworthy your raft. So think back on any skill you've ever developed in the past and apply the attitudes that worked there to this skill, here. Pay careful attention to what you're doing. Try to notice even the slightest stress that you're causing, the slightest tension that you're creating in the process of breathing; and learn to let go of whatever is causing that tension or stress.

If you find that that's too much to focus on right now, just stay with any spot in the body where you can keep tabs on the breath and try your best to make it comfortable right there. Learn to be a connoisseur of your breathing: "Okay, what kind of breathing really feels good right now?" You're the one who decides. So experiment. Deep breathing might feel good for a while and then you decide that it doesn't feel so good anymore. Well, you can change. Pay attention to what you're doing with the breath. As with any craft, the more you pay attention to what you're doing, the better the results are going to be. And this raft you're working on will become a good solid raft, one that doesn't fall apart when the currents get strong—the kind of raft that can get you all the way across.

If you want to think of the concentration as food, okay, chew your food well. In other words, pay really close, careful attention to what you're doing. Don't just try to gulp it down. Choose good food, chew it well, and you'll find that it gives you the strength you need. You don't have to go feeding in other ways. You're learning new habits here, new ways of feeding the mind. And as with any change in diet, in the beginning it may be a little hard, it may feel a little unnatural, but as you get used to eating health food, you reach a point where you look back at the old junk food you used to love and you realize you can't stomach it anymore, because the health food really does make your body feel better and stronger. You realize that you craved junk food because you didn't know any better. The junk food created the sense of lack that made you crave more and more junk food. It was a vicious cycle. But now you're getting out of that cycle. You've got an alternative. Instead of gobbling down sensual pleasures, getting sick of them and then trying to trash everything, you've got an alternative way to feed, one that doesn't cause any harm to anybody.

Ultimately you get to the point where you don't have to feed anymore. The raft gets you all the way over to the other side. That's when it has done its task and you can really let go. But in the mean time, as long as you have to hold on, hold on to good things. That's the only way you're going to get across.

The Basic Pattern

June 27, 2006

The passage in the Canon where the Buddha is teaching his seven year old son is one that bears frequent reading, frequent reflection, because it contains a lot of the really basic principles of the practice. Basic not in the sense of Buddhism for Dummies; basic in the sense of containing the essential pattern of all the teachings. You can look at these instructions as the Buddha's introduction to meditation practice, because meditation doesn't start on this cushion, it starts in your daily life. The Pali word for meditation, bhavana, means "to develop"—to develop good qualities in the mind.

And it's important to look at the qualities that the Buddha's recommending that his son develop. The discourse starts with a passage on truthfulness. You get the feeling that his son, Rahula, probably lied during the day. When the Buddha comes to see him that evening, Rahula sees him in the distance and sets out some water for washing the feet. As the Buddha washes his feet with the water, he leaves a little bit of water in the dipper. He shows the little bit of water to Rahula and says, "See how little water there is in this dipper?" Rahula says, "Yes, sir." The Buddha says, "That's how little goodness there is in a person who feels no shame at telling a deliberate lie." You can imagine Rahula cringing.

Then the Buddha throws the water away and says, "See how that water is thrown away?" Rahula says, "Yes." "That's what happens to the goodness of a person who feels no shame at telling a deliberate lie. It gets thrown away like that." The Buddha then turns the dipper upside down and then shows him how empty and hollow it is, each time with the same message: that when you feel no shame at telling a deliberate lie your goodness gets turned upside down and is empty and hollow.

So what the Buddha's establishing here is the principle of truthfulness: that you're honest about what you do. And this means being honest not only with other people, but also with yourself. Honest about what? The rest of the discourse goes on to point out that you're honest about your actions—before you act, while you're acting, and after you've acted. Take a good, close look at what you're planning to do, what you're doing, and what you've done. Before you do it, look at your intention. This act you're planning to do, what result do you expect from it? Are the results you expect going to cause any harm? If they are, don't do it. So there's an important principle right there: that your intentions are important. The consequences of your actions are important. And you want to act in a way

that doesn't harm anybody. This is the beginning of compassion.

While you're acting—and this covers not only physical actions, but also the things you say and even the things you think—look at the results that are happening while you're still engaged in the action. Sometimes things happen that you didn't expect. If there's any unexpected harm, stop. If you don't see any unexpected harm, you can continue with the action.

When you're done, reflect on the results your actions have had over time. If you see any unexpected harm, then if it was a verbal or physical action, go and confess it to somebody else who's had experience on the path. Get advice from that person. If it was simply a mental action, the Buddha says to develop a sense of distaste for that action: You don't want to think in those ways ever again.

This establishes the principle that you shouldn't be ashamed or try to hide the results of your actions from other people. You should be open about your mistakes. If you can be open about your mistakes with other people, it's a lot easier to start being open about them with yourself. At the same time, you learn from the wisdom of other people. The Buddha doesn't recommend that you reinvent the Dhamma wheel every time you act.

If, however, you notice that there was no harm from your actions, the Buddha says, "Take joy in your practice and continue with the training."

There are a lot of important principles here: the principle of truthfulness and integrity, the principle of compassion. These things are essential to the practice. Even the Buddha's most refined teachings, on the topic of emptiness, follow this same pattern: get your mind in a state of concentration and then look at it. Don't make assumptions about what it is, but just look at the intention maintaining that state of concentration. See where there's any disturbance in it; appreciate where there's a lack of disturbance. "Lack of disturbance" here corresponds to a lack of harm. The disturbance can be equated with harm on a very subtle level.

But the important thing is that you look at your meditation in terms of action and result. All too often, when people reach, say, a sense of infinite consciousness, they slip off and identify with the infinite consciousness as their "true being" or the "ground of being" from which all things come, and to which they all return. They make all sorts of assumptions based on that perception. Or they can go into the state of non-perception, where there's nothing there at all, and make assumptions based on that, forgetting to look at the fact that the state of concentration was something they did, and now they're experiencing the results. Like any other action, the concentration has to be viewed as an action and judged by its results.

So whatever level of practice you're on, whether it's simply day-to-day interactions with other people or working directly with your mind, this is the

pattern the Buddha has you adopt all the time: Look at your intentions, look at your actions, look at their results, and then adjust things based on what harm you see your actions have done. If you see that the results aren't as good as you'd like, go back and look at the intention, change the action. This requires two principles: integrity and compassion.

These are the basic Buddhist values. These are the basic values of the practice. And they can be applied at any level: among students in a classroom, or just interacting with other people in general, or as you're sitting here meditating. Remember, you're doing something. The principle of kamma, which is the Buddha's basic teaching, underlies everything, reminding you that your actions are important, that they do have consequences, and that you have the freedom to change the way you act. If you see that the consequences are causing harm, causing suffering, you can change the way you act. You have that freedom. You can learn from your mistakes.

After all, the Buddha himself started out making a lot of mistakes in his practice: all those years of self affliction, extreme austerities, six years of a big mistake. And imagine the pride that went along with that. He was able to do without all kinds of pleasures, all kinds of comforts. He practically starved himself to death. He held his breath until he went unconscious. He ate so little food that just with the effort of urinating or defecating, he would fall over. He was so weak and thin.

And in a case like that, what keeps you going? Usually, a strong sense of pride: You can do without things other people can't do without. But finally the Buddha was able to overcome his pride and realize that there was something wrong with what he was doing. This couldn't be the right way. There had to be another way. And he totally changed his understanding of the practice, totally changed the way he practiced. As a result, he was able to find the way out of suffering.

So as we practice in our imperfect ways, it's good to remind ourselves that the Buddha himself started out imperfect as well. As we make mistakes, it's good to remind ourselves that the Buddha made mistakes, too, but he also pointed the way out of your mistakes. You can change the way you act, and it's important that you do because your actions shape your life. The pleasure and pain you experience in life comes from your actions, not from anything you innately are. So when you notice that there are problems in your life, look here at what you're doing. What are your intentions? What are your actions? What can you change?

This requires that you be very honest with yourself, that you have the integrity to admit your mistakes, to see the connection between your intentions and the results of your actions, and the compassion, both for yourself and the people around you, not to want to cause harm. Once you've developed this

integrity in your day-to-day life, then it's a lot easier to bring the integrity into your meditation, because integrity lies at the basis of meditating well, too. This is why the precepts are so important. They develop this quality of integrity. If you can't be honest with yourself on the blatant level, then it's very hard to be honest with yourself on the subtle level of the practice.

So it's good to keep reflecting on those instructions to Rahula, because they focus on the basic principle that underlies everything in the practice: Your actions are important, so be very careful. At the end of the Buddha's teaching career, he closed with the words, "Bring your practice to completion through heedfulness." What does it mean to be heedful? It means that you have to be very careful about what you do, because what you do does make a difference, and it does make a difference to be heedful. If everything were totally predetermined by some principle of fate or iron-clad causality, nothing would make any difference at all, and the Buddha wouldn't have had any reason to teach. Or if your actions didn't really make a difference, there would be no reason to be heedful. But they do make a difference. And the care you take in looking at your intentions and looking at the results of your actions: That's what determines whether you'll be able to complete the path or not.

So when you're looking for a Buddhist principle to apply in all areas, this is it: Be careful about what you do, be heedful about what you do, because it makes an important difference in your life.

Equanimity Isn't Apathy

June 29, 2006

There's a discourse where the Buddha teaches his son, Rahula, how to meditate. Before he teaches him breath meditation, he tells Rahula, "Train your mind to be like the earth. When foul things are thrown on the earth, the earth isn't disgusted. When fragrant things are thrown on the earth, the earth doesn't get enchanted." Then he goes on to the other elements. Fire burns trashy things, and isn't disgusted by them, and it burns fragrant things and isn't delighted by them. Water washes away dirty things, it washes away fragrant things, but it doesn't feel one way or the other about them. Wind blows foul things around, and it blows fragrant things around, and it doesn't get disgusted by the one or excited by the other.

So having established this principle of equanimity, this principle of not letting your mind get elated by good things or depressed by bad things, the Buddha then starts in with the teaching on breath meditation. But he doesn't teach Rahula to be apathetic about the breath, saying, well, just accept whatever breathing there is. Part of the instructions is to train yourself to breathe in such a way that you're sensitive to the whole body, that you experience pleasure, that you experience rapture. These are trainings—things you have to will to happen.

So equanimity doesn't mean apathy. It means putting your mind in a position where it's able to learn about cause and effect. You want to observe how things actually happen without your likes and dislikes getting in the way of seeing what's actually going on, but you have definite preferences underlying your desire to observe. You want to observe so that you can learn how to breathe in a way that's comfortable. You want to develop rapture. You want to develop pleasure, because these things are important in the practice. You need them to keep going. Without them the practice gets dull, apathetic, and dry. It begins to burn out.

What the Buddha was training Rahula in, was a state of mind that's able to see cause and effect. Often when things go really well, you get excited and you lose it. When things go bad, you get disgusted and you drop it. You aren't stable enough to observe *why* they're good, *why* they're bad. You don't learn either way. The attitude the Buddha wants is that when things go well, you learn why they're going well. Instead of getting carried away with how wonderful things are, you ask, what's happening here? What caused this state? Sometimes the analysis, if you do it while things are happening, will mess things up, so you have to learn

how to do it right afterwards. Sometimes, though, it doesn't. If your concentration is strong enough, you can observe what you're *while* you're doing it.

So, the issue lies in getting your mind in a state where it's willing to learn, where it's able to observe cause and effect, so you can master the skill. That's how equanimity functions. It doesn't mean not caring about what happens. You care, but you also care to learn about cause and effect: what really works in getting the breath to be comfortable, what really works in getting the mind to settle down. You can't just go on the power of wanting things to be this way or that. You've got to learn what actually works, what doesn't work. You may have some ideas about what should work, but when you find that they don't, you drop them. You're not attached to them.

There's that famous passage where the Third Zen Patriarch says that the great way is not difficult for those with no preferences. In terms of the Buddha's teachings, there's only one way that that makes sense, which is that you don't have preferences about what's going to work. You admit what works, you admit what doesn't work. There may be ways of meditating that you would like to see work, but if they don't work, you put them aside. There may be methods that you have a preconceived dislike for, but if you find that they actually work, you don't let your likes and dislikes get in the way. That makes the great way a lot easier.

Look at the Buddha's teaching on the four noble truths. You treat the cause of stress differently from the path to the end of stress. You try to abandon the cause and to develop the path. It's not that you say, "I don't care which happens, whether it's stress or not stress." You do care. You care so much that you're really willing to learn, to put in all the time and effort required to learn. But you may find that it requires you to meditate on the 32 parts of the body. A lot of people don't like that, but it can be very effective. You realize that if you're going to overcome lust, you really have to look into the body, take it apart, section by section by section in your mind. Then do it again, and again, and again, however many times is required until the results really do cut through lust.

You may decide that you prefer a path that's easy and pleasant, a path that involves just letting go, letting go, not having to make an effort, not having to develop any skill, not having to attain any goal. But when you find that that doesn't work, you have to put it aside, along with all your preconceived notions. If a path that works takes a lot of work, don't be afraid of it. The mind has lots of ways of looking for an easy way out. "All that work that goes into concentration practice is just an attachment," you might say. "Well, I'm going to be beyond that attachment, skip over that, because I've already seen through it." You can't skip over it. You've got to go through the process because mastering the process is

what develops your discernment.

The mind can find all kinds of ways of avoiding the effort in the practice. You might decide, “Well, I’m just not up to this. I’m not good enough for this. I’m not cut out for this.” Learn to recognize that kind of thinking for what it is. It’s the voice of laziness trying to find some way to get around the practice. As Ajaan Maha Boowa once said, don’t be afraid of the effort that’s needed in the practice. Don’t regard it as an executioner. It’s not going to kill you. It just may take more out of you than you might want. But think of the alternative if you don’t do it. You end up looking back on your life, saying, “Gee, I could have put more into it, but I didn’t.” That’s not a good way to look back at your life. It’s better to say, “I knew what needed to be done and I did it. Whether I got all the way or not, at least I gave it my all. If I haven’t gotten all the way yet, I’ve got another lifetime coming up. I can work on it again.”

That’s what it means to be a person with no preferences. You put in the amount of work that’s required. You learn to develop the skills that are required. Whatever the path requires, you’re up for it. If you don’t feel up for it, you find ways of *making* yourself up for it. You’re willing to put in all the meticulousness that it requires, and all the time, and all the energy, learning to be very, very observant. When you find something that works, then whether you like it or not, you master it. But if you try to plan the path out beforehand, that’s just your ignorance talking, your preferences talking. You’ve been following your ignorance and your preferences for how many lifetimes? Sometimes they lead you to good places, but a lot of times they don’t. So it’s time to put them aside.

Learn to develop the mind that’s like earth. Learn to develop the mind that’s like fire—not in the sense of burning you up, but in the sense of being willing to burn anything, likable or not. That’s its natural duty. Think of the meditation as your natural duty. You’re here in this body. This body is causing suffering for a lot of other beings, because in order to keep it alive you’ve got to feed it, you’ve got to clothe it, you’ve got to provide it shelter. Look at all the work that goes into providing shelter. We’ve been building these huts now for two years and they’re still not done. For this body to stay alive it’s depending on the suffering of other people, other beings. When you put this body aside, you’re going to get another one, and regardless of what kind of body it is, it’s going to be the same process over and over again. There is, however, a path out of this process. It yields the highest happiness for you and doesn’t impose anything on anybody else. The meditation is that path. So think of that as a duty. Whatever is required, you do it, without letting your preferences get in the way.

Each of the four noble truths has its own specific duty, is based on the preference not to suffer. You definitely do want to work toward the end of suffering. You do prefer that. That’s a legitimate preference. The question is,

what's required to get there? When you've learned the requirements, you do whatever is needed to be done—even when you've completed the task.

Look at the Buddha. Even after his Awakening, he spent 45 years establishing the teaching, the Dhamma and the Vinaya. It took a lot of work. And he didn't do it with an apathetic attitude, thinking, "I don't care whether it works or not." He put a lot of effort into making it a teaching that would last. He noticed that some people would take the teaching and use it to good purpose, but he didn't let himself get elated about that. There were people who listened but then didn't really put it to any good use. He knew how not to get depressed about that. He had established mindfulness in such a way that he did what needed to be done. Of course, he preferred to do a good job of teaching. But as for the results that came, how other people took the teaching, that's where he developed the mind that was like earth, water, fire, and wind. He did his best, but as for how other people would take what he did, he learned how to put that aside.

So apathy has no place in the teaching. You need to have preferences. You do want to put an end to suffering. You have to see that preference as so important that you're willing to put all of your other preferences—and especially your preference for apathy—aside.

“May I Be Happy”

October 21, 2006

I once asked Ajaan Fuang, “What do you need to believe in order to practice meditation?”

He said, “All you need to believe is the principal of action, kamma.”

Most of us in the West, when we get to the teaching on kamma, freeze up. We start thinking about all the bad things we did in the past. We’re afraid that all those things are going to come back at us. This is why there’s so much resistance to this teaching.

But if we look more carefully at how the Buddha taught kamma, we’ll see that he actually tries to allay those fears.

When he introduces the topic of kamma, he doesn’t talk about the bad things you’ve done in the past; he talks about good things. The first topic he mentions in connection with kamma is generosity. Generosity, he says, is something real. It’s a good thing to be generous. He even has you use it as a topic of focused contemplation. When things are going dry in your meditation and everything seems to come to a stop, remind yourself of the ways you’ve been generous in the past.

The other topic the Buddha uses to introduce the topic of kamma is gratitude. Think of all the people who have helped you in the past—the ones who volunteered to help without you’re doing something nice to them first. They helped you out of the goodness of their hearts. That sort of action is worth appreciating, worth emulating. You realize how much you benefited when you were fed by them or clothed by them or taught or helped in whatever way they did. And this, combined with the principle of generosity, should inspire you to do good things for other people, to pass on the help.

So when the Buddha teaches kamma, he doesn’t start with the negative side; he starts with the positive side to emphasize that that’s what you want to make the most of. As for things you’ve done in the past that were unskillful, he advises you not to get tied up in remorse about them. Remind yourself that they really were unskillful, but you can’t go back and undo what you did. Tying yourself up in knots with thoughts of guilt or remorse, however, is not going to help either. What you should do is simply resolve that you’re not going to make those mistakes again in the future. That’s all that any human being can be asked to do.

In order to strengthen that resolve, you develop thoughts of good will. This

in itself is a form of generosity, and it leads to more generosity in the future. The more good will you feel for yourself and for the people around you, the easier it is to be generous, to be helpful both to yourself and to them.

So you simply start with that thought: “May I be happy,” like we chanted just now.

I was once talking with one of the nuns from Chithurst and happened to mention that we also chanted both in English and Pāli here at the monastery.

And she said, “Oh, how do you chant?”

I said, “Aham sukhito homi... May I be happy.”

She practically fell out of her chair laughing. In her monastery they translate it in a much more refined way: ‘May I abide in well-being.’ I must admit I prefer ‘May I be happy. It’s straightforward and gets right to the point; it’s an unabashed thought. You’re not embarrassed to say, ‘May I be happy’—because when you think about where true happiness comes from, it’s not a selfish thing. What you’re actually saying is, ‘May I find the resources inside to develop true happiness.’ If you can make yourself happy by being generous and developing thoughts of gratitude, it’s a perfectly harmless thing. If you can make yourself happy by thinking thoughts of good will for yourself and other people, that’s a harmless thing. So start with yourself and then spread thoughts of good will to people you love, people who are close to your heart, and then gradually spread it out to people you like but you don’t know so well, and then to people you’re more or less neutral about.

Then spread thoughts of good will to people you don’t like. Remind yourself that if everyone in the world could find true happiness within, if they could find happiness by being generous and developing thoughts of gratitude, the world would be a much better place; those horrible people that you really don’t like would be a lot less horrible if they could be truly happy.

Then spread thoughts of good will to people you don’t even know—and not just people: living beings of all kinds on levels you can see, on levels you can’t see. Be generous with your good will. If you find yourself resisting thoughts of good will for any particular person or being, ask yourself, ‘Why would I wish for anyone to suffer? What would I gain from it?’ Learn to reason yourself out of any stinginess with regard to your good will.

This requires digging down into a lot of your presuppositions. So when we’re doing this practice, we’re not spreading out nice pink clouds of thought to smother the world. We have to dig up places where you resist the idea of wanting someone to be happy. You can pose the question, ‘Why would I resist that idea? What would I gain from their suffering? What good would be served by their suffering?’ When you can dig out your resentments and realize that they’re not

really worth carrying around, you can extend the gift of forgiveness to that person. Forgiveness doesn't here mean that you're going to forget the wrong done by other people or you're going to love them; simply that you're not going to pose them any danger. You're not going to try to get revenge. That right there takes a huge load off the mind. The resentments you carry around really do burden you; they really do irritate the mind. So it's best to learn how to let them go.

When the Buddha teaches how to deal with thoughts of hatred, he gives the analogy of a man going through the desert—hot, thirsty and tired. He comes across a little bit of water but, the problem is, the water is in a cow's footprint; not much water at all. He knows that if he scoops his hand down to get the water, the water will become muddy and he wouldn't be able to drink it. So he very carefully has to bring his lips down to the water and slurp it up.

The water here stands for what little goodness those other people may have. It may not be much, but you look for it because you need it. You treat it with care. Notice that your position is not that of a judge passing judgment on other people. You're hot and thirsty and tired and you need to see their goodness to nourish your own heart. If you look around the human race and all you see is all the selfishness and cruelty, your heart begins to shrivel and dry. You decide that you don't want to help anyone, for everyone seems unworthy of help. In that way your own goodness dies. So you've got to view the goodness of other people as water for your own heart.

Now, in the case where you look at people, and you look and look and look and you can't find any goodness at all, then you've got to feel compassion for them because they're creating a really bad future for themselves. Again the image is that as you're walking across the desert, you find someone who's sick and incapacitated far from any human habitation. Your immediate reaction is, 'This person needs help,' and you do what you can to get that person to help. Even if you're not in a position to offer help, you do wish for that person to end his suffering, even when the suffering is self-inflicted. And as often happens when people inflict suffering on themselves, they have a little extra left to spare so they inflict suffering on other people. It would be a lot better if they learned how to stop suffering in this way. If they could learn how to find true happiness inside, they would stop inflicting the suffering on others.

So when you spread thoughts of good will, it's not just like a good will sandwich spread. The purpose here is to examine your thoughts about happiness, realizing that in this world where action really is important, actions of generosity, good will, and gratitude are especially important. They enable us to live. They're our water as we try to get through this desert alive.

So learn to focus on your good actions; caganussati, recollection of the times

you've been generous, *sīlanussati*, recollection of times you've stuck to your principles even in the face of the temptation to throw them out. Reflect on these things and remember that your strength lies there. The happiness that comes from these reflections is not like the happiness that comes from recollecting a movie you once saw or a relationship you once had, because those recollections can turn very bitter over time, especially when you realize that the relationship is ended. Whatever the happiness was, it's gone and you can't bring it back. The memory of that kind of happiness burns. But the memory of the happiness of when you were good or the times when people really helped you or were good to you out of the goodness of their hearts, is like cool, refreshing water. It provides a happiness that doesn't end. Each time you reflect on it, it's a happy thought.

And it helps to make you want to be more generous, to stick to your principles whenever the going gets tough. This is why we think thoughts of good will. They make it easier for us to be generous, to stick to our principles to be harmless. As you think about these things, they bring nourishment to the mind. When the mind is nourished, it can settle down more easily here in the present moment because you've changed your attitude about happiness. You're willing to look for your happiness here because it's the ideal kind of happiness: clear-headed, harmless, and lasting.

Just sitting here breathing, the way you relate to your breath makes all the difference in the world. You can make yourself miserable; you can put yourself in a straightjacket—but you don't have to. Think of the breath coming in and out all the pores of your body. Think of the breath energy untangling; work up from your toes, up through your feet, your legs, up through your torso. You can learn to relate to the breath energy in new and different ways. You find that the less suffering you cause yourself here—and it's totally needless suffering—the easier it is to be good to other people.

So think about these things. Develop the right attitude toward happiness, the right attitude to the principle of *kamma*. *Kamma* can be a means to happiness if you understand how to use it properly—the principle of action and result. It all comes down to developing good qualities of the mind. You notice that certain ways of thinking are skillful. They take burdens off the mind. They help nourish the mind. So encourage those ways of thinking, because if you don't, you'll develop other habits in the mind. It may seem artificial to focus on these habits, but then the construction of the present moment is always something artificial.

There's a large element of intention in every experience, so you might as well intend to do it well. Construct healthy and nourishing thoughts. You have it within your power to do so. So try to make the most of that opportunity.

A Meditator's Vocabulary

November 13, 2006

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

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

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

If anger arises, watch how the anger affects the breath. If pleasure arises, watch how the breath and the pleasure are related. Don't leave the breath to gobble down the pleasure. Notice that it's there, then try to see the connection, but don't let go of your basic frame of reference which, for the time being, is the

body in and of itself. Just keep reminding yourself to stay there. That's what mindfulness is about, that mental note that keeps you with your topic, keeps you with your frame of reference.

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

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

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

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

This question of what you're doing right now is the basic question in the meditation: Do you really know what you're doing? A lot of the movements of the mind are subconscious. A lot of the movements of the mind are done in ignorance. Those are the ones that cause suffering. After all, that's the cause of suffering: the things that come out of the mind through ignorance. So when you're told to be alert to what's going on in the present moment, this is where you're supposed to focus, for this is what we're fighting: this ignorance of our own actions.

This is one of the reasons why we focus on the breath, because the breath is very close to our intentions. In the factors of dependent co-arising, the breath is

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

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

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

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

Giving to the Meditation

December 27, 2006

A recurring theme in the Buddha's teachings is that everything you need for happiness, for true happiness, you already have. It's simply a matter of developing it. The word for meditation, *bhavana*, literally means development. You take what you've got, and nourish it so that it grows.

So it's good to take stock at the beginning of the meditation: What are you bringing to the meditation? You may be bringing a day full of scattered thoughts, worries about this, that, the other thing, and as you focus on the negative things you're bringing to the meditation it makes it difficult. Focus on the positive things: You've got a body; you've got the breath; you've got a certain amount of mindfulness, a certain amount of alertness. If you didn't have these things you'd be dead or crazy. So you've got the raw materials you need. So remind yourself everything you need is right here. It's simply a matter of bringing it all together and putting some effort into it to keep them together.

Your willingness to give the effort is important, because along with the Buddha's teaching on the fact that you already have what you need for happiness, you find the very basic role he gives to generosity—to the act of giving. His explanation of right view on the mundane level starts with giving, that giving really is a good thing. It's a virtue. When he was going to teach people about the Four Noble Truths he would start out by talking about giving and then work his way up from there.

When you think about giving, you realize it's what you're bringing into any particular situation. If it's a relationship with another person, what you give that other person—that's what you bring into the situation. It reminds you that you have more than enough. If you constantly focus on what you lack, it's like you're burning a hole in your mind, and that hole has teeth. You're constantly wanting to gobble this down, gobble that down. But if you focus on what you've got that you're able to give, it creates a very different attitude for you to bring to the meditation. A person who's able to give is a person who's already in a position of wealth, even if it's a little tiny thing that you have to give: You have more than enough; you can share.

And the same with the meditation. When you sit here and meditate it's not simply a matter of sitting here and waiting for the show to begin or for someone to come and entertain you. It's a matter of your putting yourself into the

meditation, giving yourself to the meditation: That's going to make all the difference. You find sometimes when you sit down that you put a little effort into it and the results are right there. Other times, though, it's going to take quite a while before you even notice the results. It's not the fact that the results are not there, but often other things are getting in the way so you don't see them.

So, trust in the process, and *give yourself* to the process. Be aware of the breath. Keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath. That act of mindfulness is important: Every time you breathe in, every time you breathe out remind yourself, "This is where you want to be; this is where you want to stay." And if you find that you've forgotten, that you've wandered off someplace else, well, remind yourself again.

And then come back and be as alert to the breath as possible: How does it feel? Where do you feel the breath? Try to put aside whatever notions you have about how the breath *should* feel or *where* you should feel the breath, and try to be sensitive to how you actually feel. Where are the sensations that let you know now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out? And what's the quality of those sensations? Is it comfortable? Are you putting pressure on it? If you are, step back a little bit. Allow the sensations to have a fullness of their own without your having to squeeze them in a particular direction. Think of all the cells in your body as being full, and then notice how the process of breathing changes as you think of the body in different ways.

If you bring an attitude of wealth to the meditation, an attitude of contentment to the meditation, you find it a lot easier to put up with the problems that you're going to encounter: the fact that you're going to forget and wander off and think about what you were doing last night or what you're planning to do tomorrow or whatever. When that happens, you can just bring yourself right back. And because you're not desperate and because you're not feeling impoverished you don't have to browbeat yourself over it. Just come back and pick up the job, pick up the work and keep with it.

And you're also in a much better position to notice what's going on. The insights people have in the course of their meditation when they're feeling desperate are not especially reliable insights. You're grasping at *whatever* comes your way: Whatever seems to make sense, whatever seems to work right now in the split second—you grasp at it. But there's no guarantee that the insight's going to be trustworthy or reliable. It's much more reliable when you come to it with a sense of well being and you notice, "Oh, I'm adding this unnecessary stress here. I'm creating this unnecessary problem." When you see that it's unnecessary, when you see that it's a problem, you can let it go because you have that sense of well being with which to compare.

So always try to bring an attitude of generosity, an attitude of wealth, an

attitude of well being to the meditation. We talk about meditating to gain a sense of well being, but it's like investing in a business: You're not going to get any profit unless you have something to invest. And remind yourself you *do have* what you need: You've got the breath. You've got a mind. You've got these qualities of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment. They're all there in an inchoate form. You've got the seeds for these things. The meditation is simply an opportunity to allow them to grow and to flourish, so that the seeds of well being that you already have will have the opportunity to show exactly how far they can go.

So try to be conscious of that wealth that you're bringing to the meditation, because that's what we're trying to develop. It's not that concentration will appear out of nothing, or well being will appear out of nothing. It comes from learning how to tend to the seeds, how to tend to the little sprouts you already have. So be willing to give of the effort that's required, and ultimately you'll find that the results are more than worth the effort.

Don't Listen to This Talk

January 4, 2007

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

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

To observe this, you need not to be just passive. If you were totally passive, you would never learning anything about cause and effect at all. Events would simply just pass by, pass by, pass by, and you wouldn't know what was connected with what. But it is a fact that we can act. We can make choices. We can do things, we can change things. That is what permits us to know cause and effect. For instance, if there's pain in the body, try adjusting the breath to see how it affects the pain. If you don't make any manipulation or any adjustment in the breath at all, you'll have no idea if the breathing is contributing to the pain, or if pain is influencing the breathing, or if they're connected in any way at all. If you change the breath, then you can see, oh, it does or does not have an impact on

that pain. It does or does not have an impact on the way you relate to the pain. This is when adjusting is useful—in fact it's important, it's essential to the practice. It's a set of skills you need to develop.

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

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

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

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

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

right effort.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Mystery & a Puzzle

January 6, 2007

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

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

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

The desire to follow the path is a skillful desire. The desire to figure out the problem of suffering is a skillful desire. That's the kind of desire you want to encourage. As for the end of suffering, that's the part you haven't experienced yet. If you learn how to look at what you're doing, what you're experiencing in terms of those other three truths, ultimately the truth of cessation will appear. So this means you have to learn how to ignore a lot of things that are irrelevant and focus instead on things that you may have passed over in the past to solve this mystery of suffering. Why is it that every action we do is for the sake of

happiness, and yet we cause so much suffering? That really is a mystery.

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

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

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

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

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

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

With regard to things inside, though, the Buddha said that one of the secrets of his Awakening is that he never allowed himself to stay content with where he was. We have to understand this carefully. It doesn't mean that he was always trying to move on to the next thing, the next thing, the next thing, because as he recommends himself, when you attain a certain level of concentration, you have to learn how to indulge in it. You have to stick there, stay there, enjoy it, get to know it well. If you're in too great a hurry to move on to the next thing, the next level of concentration, you lose your foundation. What this means is that you learn how to enjoy the concentration, all the while knowing in the back of your mind that at some point you're going to have to outgrow it. So as long as you're not complacent, and you don't misunderstand what's happening, you're okay, because you really need to work on establishing this foundation. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, you want to be crazy about the meditation if you want to do it well. Make it into something that you always want to be doing.

Even as you're going around the monastery, cleaning things up, taking care of things, whatever the jobs you have around here: Don't abandon the breath. Stick with the breath. See where your mind is, what you can learn about the

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

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

The Buddha gives you the framework for looking at things. The question of what's skillful, what's unskillful: This underlies everything. The teachings start with the precepts, so that you get a sense of what's skillful and unskillful at a blatant level. You learn how to deal with the issue of noticing when you've done something unskillful. You learn to make the resolve not to repeat the mistake, without getting tangled up in remorse. You realize that all that can be asked of a human being is that you don't repeat the mistakes that you've clearly seen that you've done. You try to develop the proper attitude that helps keep you from harming yourself and harming others. In other words, you develop this attitude of goodwill for all beings, yourself included. This is how you get the right attitude toward your mistakes, realizing that we have all made mistakes, but we can all learn. You don't want to be constantly standing on your pride, saying, "Well, whatever I do has to be good." That doesn't get you anywhere. At the same time, though, you don't want to be the sort of person who feels that you're a miserable failure with no hope at all. That doesn't accomplish anything either.

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

Once you've developed the right attitude toward your actions through observing the precepts, you've learned a lot of good skills to help your meditation. You have practice in not denying what you're doing; you're not denying the stress that you're causing yourself. This is one of the big traps for a meditator, this habit of denial. If you can avoid that trap, the meditation gets a

lot easier. You're always ready to learn. You're not embarrassed or ashamed to look at your mistakes. You know how to deal with them confidently.

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

So those are the puzzle pieces. It's both a mystery and a puzzle, why we suffer. You have to be the sort of person who, on the one hand, is able to see the big picture of the four noble truths to solve the mystery, and on the other, to look for the details in the movements of the mind to solve the puzzle. Ultimately, the problem of suffering neither is a puzzle nor a mystery, and in that way you learn not to suffer ever again.

Normalcy

June 9, 2007

When we read about other people's meditation experiences, we like to read about the really dramatic ones: The meditator's awareness leaves his body and goes wandering around, sees all kinds of visions. Or a meditator discovers a sense of oneness with everything she sees. Everything is beautiful, luminous. These things sound very impressive, something we'd like to try too. But you have to look a little further into their stories, and you realize that those kinds of extreme experiences are things that have to be remedied. They're problems. They actually get in the way of the goal. When meditators have experiences like that, their teacher—if they have a good meditation teacher—will say, “Okay, you've got to get over that; you've got to get past that. The weird stuff is not what it's all about.”

Here it's good to remember two things. One: *Sila*, ordinarily translated as “virtue,” is one of the requisites for meditation. *Sila* also means normalcy. You're trying to develop a state of normalcy in your actions, where you're not deviating from harmless behavior. You're not going off into extremes of harmful behavior because you're trying to establish a pattern that will carry into your meditation. You want to keep the mind in a state of normalcy as well, where it's not going to the extremes.

Why do we tend to fall into extremes? In some cases it's because we want a larger sense of self. We're tired of being finite people and want a taste of the infinite. In others, we want to annihilate ourselves. We become one with the tree so that the tree can take over. We become one with the wall so that the wall can take over. We want to blot out our experience of who we are and who we've been. Or we push ourselves into extremes with the idea if we just push a little bit harder, we'll get over the hump and into jhana, into the transcendent. But these things don't come from pushing. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if we could get our way into nibbana by pushing, everybody would have pushed their way in there by now. The mind likes to push and pull. It's much harder to settle into a state of normalcy where there's no pushing or pulling, but if you want to get solid results, that's where you have to aim.

The second point to remember is that we're practicing the middle way. We're trying to stay away from extremes of eternalism, where you expand to become one with the universe around you, and annihilation, where you want yourself to be annihilated, say, as a little drop of water that gets totally swallowed up by the

ocean. Instead, we're trying to find a place where you can stand in the middle, in a state of normalcy. The mind isn't going up, isn't going down. It's just right here. But it's very solidly right here, very clearly right here. We're looking for the clarity. We're not trying to put ourselves into trances. The texts do contain descriptions of trance states, but those are largely in the commentaries and they're dangerous things to play with. You get your mind into all kinds of weird situations, weird perceptions, extreme perceptions. Then you've got to get yourself out, because that's not where you're going—at least not where you're going if you're going anywhere sane, anywhere safe.

So when you catch the mind trying to push itself into an unusual state, pull back. Remind yourself that that's not the middle path. We're not here to push; we're not here to pull. We're here to settle down. If your mind has a natural tendency to go in those directions, you've got to learn how to remedy it. When it's going there simply because you want to try something weird, unusual, and new in your meditation, you've got to say, wait a minute, wherever you get you're going to have to pull yourself back, so why bother going? You want to be right here, with a sense of ease, a sense of normalcy, observing what Ajaan Lee calls the precepts of the mind.

For example, there's the precept against killing. Okay, try not to kill this state of just being normal in the present moment. The precept against stealing: Don't try to steal other people's meditation experiences and make them your own. The precept against illicit sex: Don't try to become one with everything around you. The precept against lies: Don't try to hoodwink yourself into thinking that these states are special. And the precept against intoxicants: Don't try to intoxicate yourself with a trance state. You want to be normal, clear. Otherwise, how are you going to see things for what they are?

Sometimes you read that in the stages of insight you get into weird psychophysical experiences. Those descriptions are designed by people who are trying to sell a particular kind of meditation. You're going off to spend a week where you want to have something to show for it, something you can talk about when you return. It's hard to tell your friends, "You know, I maintained my mind in a state of normalcy for the entire week." It doesn't impress anybody. But you're not here to impress people; you're not here to impress yourself. You're here to see things clearly. The best way to see things clearly is to get the mind into a state of stillness.

We tend to think of the stages of jhana as very strong trance states, but actually they're the mind in a state of genuine normalcy where it's very perceptive, very clearly perceiving things as they are, as they come as they go, able to see distinctions. That's what we're working on, trying to keep the mind in a state of normalcy, as with all the elements of the path. The qualities of the path

are things we've already experienced, things we've already tasted. It's simply that we haven't seen the strength they can develop if they're made continuous, if they're made all-around. This state of centered, clear normalcy in the mind, if you could really maintain it, would build up a lot of strength.

To do this, you develop a sense of the observer in concentration where you're able to just watch things come and go. Like Ajaan Chah's example of the monkey. If you don't really understand monkeys, you become a monkey too. When the monkey jumps around, your mind jumps around with the monkey. But what we're trying to do here is to stay in a state of normalcy where the monkey jumps, but we don't jump. We know it's jumping, but we're not jumping along with it. And even though this is a fabricated state of stillness and equanimity, still it's part of the path—because, after all, the entire path is a fabrication.

So we are not trying to induce special experiences. Sometimes they may happen and then the question will be: When they happen, what you do with them? How to get yourself back to normalcy?

But if they're not happening on their own, don't try to induce them. You try to develop a state of normalcy where the mind can stay still and calm in the face of what it likes, in the face of what it doesn't like. If that sounds too dull, we may want to try to force something unusual, like obliterating all distinctions between subject and object. But look carefully at that desire. There may be a strong but subtle sense of aversion underlying it, or a strong but subtle sense of passion. It's not the way of the path. Those passions and aversions are the things you've got to learn how to see and uproot.

So when you find your mind leaning in those directions, remind yourself that this is not the path. You're leaning off to one side or another. When you're on the path, you're trying to stay on the middle way right here. It may not seem very impressive. But again, we're not here to impress anybody; we're here to see things clearly. And the strength of the path doesn't come from pushing things. It comes from allowing the state of normalcy to get constant. You get here and you just don't budge, don't budge. In this way, the strength develops.

So keep this in mind. We're trying to work on a state of normalcy. This is how the practice of the precepts shades into the practice of concentration. And then it shades into discernment, because you see the normal way of the mind. It's normally been creating suffering, but you can see a deeper state of normalcy, a state of true well-being that's very, very subtle, which comes when you're not creating suffering anymore. So you've got to see the normal habits of the mind that have been creating suffering before you can undo them, let go of them. Only then can you uncover normalcy in the deeper sense.

So what we are doing is something very normal. What's unusual about it is that we're trying to maintain this state of normalcy as consistently as we can throughout the day. That's really extraordinary. It's the consistency that makes it special.

Stay Tuned

October 9, 2007

Try to tune in on the breath. There are different ways you can do this. You can start out by thinking about the breath. You might have a mental picture with the energy flowing through the body, around the body. Or you can tune in to the feeling of the breath. Like a vapor of alcohol, it can't be contained. It has no clear or boundaries. It flows through the body, around the body. So allow your mind to tune in to the lightness of the breath in the same way that you tune a radio to a specific station. This is called tuning in to the level of form.

The mind can experience three levels of becoming. There's the level of sensuality, where you're focused on your desire for sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations. There's the level of form, which is primarily your inner sensation of the body—how the body feels from inside—and this is defined in four terms: in terms of the breath, in terms of earth, water, fire. In other words, breath is a sense of motion or energy; earth is the solidity; water is the coolness, the liquid sensations; and fire is the warmth. That's form. Then there is the formless level, which covers things like space or awareness.

And you can tune in to any of these. They are here all the time. It's a question of which one you choose to focus on, which one you want to stay with. It's like setting up a TV set, an AM/FM radio, and a short-wave radio here in the sala. You realize there are lots of waves coming through the sala right now. The TV-station waves, the AM/FM radio waves, the short waves, and you could choose to tune in to any of them. They're all here. It's simply a question of which one you are going to choose. And our minds tend to be channel surfers. We jump from one to the other, sometimes TV, sometimes radio, different channels, different radio stations. If we keep jumping around like this, we just pick up bits and snatches of things. We don't hear or see anything all the way through.

This is why we have to choose to stay consistently with one level of becoming. So let's focus on the body in and of itself, the sensation of having a body here right now, the sensation of warmth, coolness, motion, solidity. Try to stay focused on that level. Any images or sensations or notions from other levels, just let them go, let them pass. They are going to be here, but you don't have to focus on them. Stay consistently with a sense of the body, how you're feeling it from the inside. And hang on right there.

As we do this, we're creating a state of becoming. That's what the path is all

about. You create the path, you bring it into being. This is one of the paradoxes of the Buddha's whole teaching. On the one hand we're trying to overcome craving for becoming, which is one of the causes of suffering. But the path we follow is one that brings something into being. We do some becoming, but it's a tactical sort of thing. As you stay consistently with the breath, you start to understand things better, you see things more clearly. It's like tuning in to one channel, or one radio station, and just staying there. If there's music, you hear the piece all the way through. If there's a discussion, you hear the discussion from beginning to end. In other words, you know things all the way from cause to effect. That's how you give rise to the discernment that will set you free.

The Buddha uses a different analogy. Of course in those days they didn't have radio stations, so his analogy is planting a seed in a field. The field here is your kamma. The fact that you've got a body sitting here right now, that's a result of past kamma. The seed is your consciousness, your awareness. And for any seed to grow, of course, you've got to plant it in one place. You don't move it around. Planting it here today, then digging it up tomorrow, moving it someplace else, you'll never get the plant you want. So you stay in one place. And then once the seed is in place, you water it. You water it with delight.

In other words, the practice of concentration has to be something you like to do. This is why it's important when you meditate, when you're trying to develop a state of concentration, that you choose an object you like. Or you can take the most common object, which is the breath, and you *make* it into something you like. In that way the state of becoming grows. So the field here is the sense of the body from within, the seed of consciousness is focused on one spot in the body. The essence of what it means to have a state of becoming is that you choose a location to stay focused. And because you want this one to develop, you don't go channel surfing. You don't go moving your seed around along with your mood. You choose a place and then stick with it, and then you water it with delight.

In the beginning, the delight is simply the sense of interest that comes from exploring what it feels like to inhabit the body, what this breath energy is that we keep talking about, what's earth, what's water, what's fire. It sounds like primitive chemistry but it's not. It's more like giving us a vocabulary to help you see and describe things inside, the same way that professional tasters need a detailed vocabulary to describe all the variations of taste. The more complete your vocabulary, the more you start seeing, the more you start sensing.

It's the same with the breath, and the same with all the elements of body. Try to use this vocabulary as a way of classifying the different sensations you feel, as you explore the body from within. What's the difference between breath sensations say, as opposed to liquid sensations? The more precisely you can detect the breath in this way, the more precisely you can choose the right point to focus.

Then you just plant your seed right there. In other words, you stay right there. You don't move around.

Then try to develop your sense of delight by exploring how you can make the breath energy feel good in the different parts of the body, how you can use the breath energy to soothe away pains, tension, or tightness in different parts of the body. In this way, the delight turns into not simply interest, but a sense of real pleasure, gratification from being on this level of form.

And try to establish a sense of oneness with the breath. This is important. When the Buddha describes the different levels of jhana, he talks about singleness of preoccupation as being common to all of them. In other words, you're focused on one thing, but your relationship to the object changes. In the first jhana you're thinking about the object, and you're evaluating it. So even though you're with one object, there's not yet a sense of being totally one with it. The mind is hovering around it, trying to adjust it, trying to get it so that it's really just right.

Then, when it's just right, you go into it. You enter into the breath. Your sense of awareness, your consciousness, is firmly planted in the soil. Your awareness is firmly planted in the breath. You feel like you're surrounded by breath, you're one with the breath. And then you try to maintain that sense of oneness. You don't have to think much about it, you don't have to evaluate much anymore. Just stay with that sense of oneness. The breath will start changing. It'll grow more calm, more balanced throughout the body, until the breath energy throughout the whole body feels like one single connected sensation, as it grows more and more still.

You take this sense of oneness and then you can apply it to other things, like space. This is where you move into the formless realms: the infinitude of space, the infinitude of consciousness—that's as far as the oneness can take you. Then you have to drop the oneness to get to the state of nothingness. In other words, the oneness of the knowing gets put aside. This is how you tune in to the formless realms.

So you start by trying to take this seed of your awareness and planting it very firmly in the sense of the body, just in and of itself, as you're experiencing it from within. Give rise to the state of becoming right here, on the level of form. Or, to switch back to the radio analogy, stay tuned to this station. Even though there may be other waves going through the air, other waves going through the building, you're going to stay on this frequency, so that the mind moves in unison with this frequency. The longer you stay here, the better chance you have of seeing things clearly.

This is why we have to bring the state of becoming into being. This is why the path, even though it ultimately leads beyond becoming, has to make use of

becoming to go beyond. Because while you do this, you start understanding: “What is the process of becoming? What is this kamma that forms the field? What is the consciousness that forms the seed? What’s the delight that keeps it watered? And because you’re still, you can see these things in action. You can see the slightest movements of the mind. When there’s a sense of ease and well-being, the mind begins to open up, so that whatever insights it gains go really deep and change things inside. But your duty for now is to stay tuned, stay planted right here. Learn how to take delight in the station you’re tuned to, take delight in the fact that you’re on the right path, because that delight is what makes the path grow.

A Mind like Wind

November 17, 2007

When you come to the monastery, you tend to bring a lot of other things trailing in your wake. You sit down and they gather around you: issues from your family, issues from work, issues from home, and issues from the media. If you want to create some space for the mind, you have got to cut these things away. This is why meditation starts by establishing a frame of reference.

You start out with the body in and of itself. In other words you're not thinking of your body in the world, whether it's a good looking body or not, whether it's strong or weak one, agile or clumsy. All of those issues relate to the body in the world. You want to avoid them because it's very easy to slip from there into other world issues: what other people are thinking, what other people are doing, what you think about their thinking, what you think about their doing. You want to be able to cut through these things, so keep reminding yourself you're going to stay with the body in and of itself. You've got the breath right here. That's a body issue in and of it self.

Learn how to relate to the breath in a friendly way. That makes it easier to stick with it. Learn how to be sensitive to how it feels when it's long, how it feels when it's short, and decide which kind of breathing feels best for you right now. You can choose, you know. The breath, after all, is a bodily fabrication that has an element of intention in it. So take advantage of that.

As the breath gets more comfortable, you can start thinking about being aware of the whole body as you breathe in and as you breathe out. This helps you move into the present moment with a sense of belonging here. You're not squeezed out of the present by being confined to just one little part of the body. You can inhabit the whole body and simply stay right here, allowing the breath to calm down. You don't force it to calm down, but as you're trying to be aware of the whole body, you're not thinking about other things.

The more you can inhabit the present moment like this, the harder it is to switch off to the past or the future. It's almost as if you have your hands and feet nailed down so you can't go running off anywhere else. And that way the breath can calm down naturally because you're thinking less, so you're using less oxygen. The thinking is focused right here, on the body in and of its self. Ajaan Lee compares this kind of thinking to grabbing hold of a post and running around it. As long as you hold on to the post, then no matter how much you run

around, you don't get dizzy. But if you let go of the post and try to spin around, you get dizzy and fall down. So hold on to the post of the breath, and your thinking can circle around the breath. Just be careful that it doesn't lose its frame of reference and go running off into the world.

This is called establishing mindfulness or establishing a frame of reference. Once it's established, you develop it by holding on to that frame of reference as other things come up. You're aware of things arising and you're aware of things staying and passing away, but you don't lose touch with your body. If a thought comes up, see how it relates to the body. What feelings arise in the body together with the thought, what feelings pass away when the thought passes away? This is a useful insight. You see what you do as you're thinking. In order to stay, a thought has to have its little niche there in the body, a spot with a little bit of tension that you associate with the thought as a reminder, a kind of marker, that that's the thought you're going to stay with.

When you see this happening, learn how to breathe through that little niche of tension. Then the thought will go away. Then you can carry this skill out into other activities as well, as you're walking around the monastery, as you're doing chores or interacting with other people. Try to stay with the body as your frame of reference—how it feels to be in the body when you're talking, when you're walking, when other people say things that you react to. Look for the reaction primarily in its physical side: how it influences the body and how it affects the body. That gives you a handle on how to deal with issues that come up in the mind.

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha's teaching Rahula how to meditate, and he starts out by telling him to meditate with a mind like earth. When people spit on the earth, the earth doesn't get disgusted. When people put flowers on the earth, the earth doesn't get delighted or elated. It just stays right there. Or, you can meditate with a mind like fire. Fire will burn up disgusting things and it will burn up nice things, and not really feel one way or another, liking or disliking the things it burns. Or meditate with a mind like water. Water will wash away clean things, it'll wash away fragrant smelling things, it'll wash away foul smelling things, but whatever it's washing away, the water doesn't give rise to likes or dislikes. Or meditate with a mind like wind. The wind will blow nice things and bad things away. It will blow ash over here from the fires. It will blow the smell of a flower, but it doesn't feel one way or the other about what it's blowing.

So where do you get in touch with earth, fire, water, and wind? Right here in the body. The body is made out of these same sensations: solidity, liquidity, warmth, movement and energy. They're all right here in the body. So take your cue from the body. When there's a disturbance in the body, realize it. There may

be a change in your heart rate, a change in feelings of tension or tightness in different parts of the body. Remind yourself that these things may be the result of the mind's actions that spread into the body. These things can take hold if we allow them to stay in the body. But you can adjust them, zap them, with your breath.

So, this is one way of dealing with recurring thoughts. As soon as you sense the tension or the reaction, just undo it. Try to breathe in a way that allows the blood to flow smoothly at all times, so you're not reacting to things outside. In one sense it helps you take possession of the present moment, so you really feel like you belong here. You're not being pushed out by other people's actions. At the same time, you give yourself a stronger position from which to look at your reactions.

When you react with disliking, liking, desire, or fear, exactly what's going on? These things gain a lot of power because they have their physical component as well as their mental component, but if you defuse the physical component those thoughts are a lot easier to look at. They're a lot less overwhelming. Then you can start looking at the stories behind them.

Say somebody gets you angry: What are the stories you tell yourself about that person?—about how that person should be acting and why he isn't acting the way you want him to. Learn to look at those stories with a skeptical eye. Sometimes you hear the idea that when you meditate you're supposed to practice radical acceptance, as if that's what the path were all about. While you accept what's actually going on, you've got to do a lot more. You've got to learn how to be skeptical about what's going on as well. These stories that the mind tells itself: Why believe them? What do you gain by believing them? Are they really true? How much do you know about their truth? Even if they are true, are they really beneficial? You've got to have a certain skeptical ear as you listen to these thoughts, and a skeptical eye as you observe what they're doing.

It's only with this measure of skepticism that you can begin to recognize your defilements for what they are. The sense of being at ease in the body helps keep that skepticism from becoming bitter or cynical. Simply learn to put a question mark next to things. Is that really true? Is it really beneficial? Is this really the right time to be thinking that thing? Why should I believe that story if it makes me suffer? In this way, you learn how to free yourself from a lot of influences that otherwise would take over your mind and then stay there ensconced for days on end. This ability to be a little bit skeptical can keep you sane in the midst of all the insanity going on around us.

I was talking with a yoga teacher today who said that her clients were all saying they wished it were January 1st, that they were done with the holidays. All the Christmas stuff is very stressful for a lot of people. It's supposed to be fun, it's

supposed to be joyful, but it's just a lot of stress and a lot of hassle. She wanted to know what to tell her students. I said to tell them to approach the whole thing like an anthropologist, watching the quaint customs of the natives, and allowing yourself to stand apart from them a little bit.

This is what being with the body—trying to get in touch with just the physicality of the body, trying to maintain that mind state that's like earth, water, wind, and fire—can do for you. It gives you a good solid place to stand, a separate place to stand, a place where you've got your internal sense of wellbeing. You're not hungering after the things of the world, so you don't have to gobble them down. You can question them.

This way you establish a sense of seclusion. When they talk about the happiness of jhana being based on seclusion, this is the kind of seclusion they're talking about. You're not only sitting here separated from society at large but you're also standing apart a bit from your thoughts. You've got a different frame of reference that allows you to question the stories and not identify with them so much.

So, develop a mind like fire, wind, earth, and water, a mind that's in tune with the body as you're experiencing it right here, right now—and particularly with the breath, which is part of the wind element. If there are any aberrations in the breath, put a little question mark next to them. Does it have anything to do with a mental event that just happened? Is there any reaction going on, any anger, any lust, any fear? Then breathe through the aberration. If it's necessary to deal with the thought, okay, you're dealing with it from a much better perspective. You've got a different frame of reference from which to look at the thought. If you don't have to deal with it, that's fine. Just breathe through it and let it go. If you have trouble analyzing the thought, maybe your concentration isn't strong enough for it yet, so learn how to put the thought aside. The important thing is that your frame of reference be strong, solid, and imperturbable.

This is why mindfulness practice shades ultimately into concentration practice because you're sticking with one thing as your frame of reference and it becomes continual. The Buddha himself never drew a sharp line between mindfulness and concentration. Mindfulness as it grows stronger becomes concentration. It becomes purified in concentration, steadied so that your discernment can start doing its work; figuring out where there are still Velcro hooks on your mind and how you can shave them off, not getting snagged and sucked into the story lines that make you suffer.

So, learn to see the body, your experience of the body, largely as breath. Then make your mind like breath. When they come together in this way, you've got a really solid place to stand.

Right View

November 20, 2007

The discourse we chanted just now—“Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion”—starts with the whole noble eightfold path and then goes into right view. And that’s all it discusses in detail: right view, going through the four noble truths. Simply listening to this talk on right view, one of the five brethren had his first taste of the deathless—or, as they say, experienced “the arising of the Dhamma Eye.” So right view is important. As one analysis of the path says, three qualities circle around every factor of the path. One is right view. The second is right effort. The third is right mindfulness. So try to make sure that these three qualities are circling around your practice right now.

There are basically four truths covered by right view. First is the truth of suffering or stress; *dukkha* is the Pali term. Sometimes we’re told that the first truth is that “life is suffering” or “everything is suffering,” but that’s not the case. The Buddha said basically that “there is suffering.” It’s one of four things you’re going to encounter that you should pay attention to. You might be able to argue with the idea that life is suffering, but you can’t argue with the idea that there is suffering. You see it all around you. You see it inside you as well. The Buddha’s simply asking you to take it seriously.

To take suffering seriously means that you should learn how to comprehend it. To do that, you have to put yourself in a position where you can watch it, to see how it comes, see how it goes, see what comes and goes along with it. The coming and going along with it: That’s essentially what the word *samudaya*—usually translated as “cause” or “origination”—means. You want to see that every time that there’s real suffering in the mind, there’s an element of craving—three kinds of craving to be specific: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.

Craving for sensuality is easy enough to explain: the desire to have sensual desires. That’s one of the most interesting parts of the analysis: that sensual attachment is not so much to ‘things out there’; we’re more attached to our *plans* for things out there, our scheming for things out there, for pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. We spend a lot more time planning and working toward these things than we actually do in tasting them.

Many times the taste is very fleeting. Think about the food we eat. Exactly how long does it really taste good in your mouth? Look at that little burst of taste,

and then think of how much work goes into buying the food, preparing the food, cleaning up after the meal. Of course we do it for more than just the taste; we do it to keep the body going. But, there's an awful lot of energy expended in the idea, "Let's make this taste really good"—and then it's gone.

We're actually more attached to our plans for these things, our desires for these things, than we are to the things themselves. It's easy enough to replace a desire for one thing with a desire for something else. It's hard to drop desire entirely. That's one of the causes of suffering.

Another cause is craving for becoming. You want to become something, to take on a particular identity, within a particular world. We choose our worlds, you know: the context in which we see ourselves, the context in which we move and exert an influence. These two things are entwined: both the world in which we have a self and the sense of self itself. Sometimes this world is on the sensual level. Sometimes it's on the level of form, as when we're meditating and fully inhabiting the form of the body. Sometimes it's on the formless level—any abstraction, anything without a form. And again, we tend to go from one of these types of becoming to another... to another... to another. This is what the wandering on is all about. We go from one *bhava*, one state of becoming, to another. These are the locations that the mind focuses on. And we suffer from this because none of these locations can last; none of these positions can last. Whatever we latch onto as a self, it just keeps melting away. The world around us just keeps melting away.

Then there's craving for non-becoming, the desire to destroy whatever you've got, whatever you identify yourself with. Or you want to destroy the world around you. It's unpleasant. You don't like it. You want to get rid of it, which can either be an external destructive urge or an internal destructive urge. Paradoxically, this type of craving leads to becoming as well. Why is that? Because in taking on the identity of the Destroyer, you're assuming another identity. In taking delight in the idea of destruction, you're watering the sense of identity; you're watering a sense of being.

The Buddha's image is of a seed planted in the ground; the seed is your consciousness. The ground is your kamma, past and present, as it's manifesting right now. Then there's the delight in doing something with it, either creating something out of it or destroying it. All of that counts as a cause of suffering. It may sound pretty abstract, but as you get to know the mind you begin to sense the movement as it's going one of these directions or another: toward becoming or non-becoming. In one sense we're in a double bind; the desire to get rid of becoming itself is a way of creating becoming, but this is where the Buddha's genius as a strategist comes in.

He's says that you go beyond becoming not by destroying becoming but by

learning how to create new forms of becoming that are more skillful, particularly the “becoming” of concentration, getting the mind to settle down and be in one spot. As long as you’re going to have a location, have a solid steady location, because it’s a blameless way of giving rise to happiness. Then, when you can see things clearly, you can simply let the processes of becoming go.

Sometimes you hear about the dangers from being stuck on concentration. But if you look through the texts, the Buddha talks about them only in very rare cases. He mentions the dangers of delighting in the state of equanimity or of not wanting to go beyond a particular state, but these are pretty harmless, pretty minor compared to the dangers of staying stuck in sensuality.

The Buddha gave long, long discourses about all the suffering and conflict that come from sensual craving. You have to work hard and sometimes you don’t gain anything from working hard. Or, even when you do gain things, they don’t really stay with you. As the Buddha says, sometimes fire burns them, water washes them away, thieves or kings will make off with them—I like that: pairing thieves with kings—or hateful heirs make off with them. It’s because of sensual craving that there are conflicts within the family, conflicts among nations. This is why we go to war. I don’t think that anyone has ever gone to war over attachment to jhana, attachment to concentration. We kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie to each other, indulge in intoxicants all because of sensual craving, sensual attachment—none of which happens because of our attachment to jhana. The only danger of being stuck on jhana is that as long as you’re stuck, you don’t gain Awakening.

So jhana is a relatively blameless form of happiness. It gives us nourishment on the path and at the same time is a very transparent form of becoming. We watch ourselves doing it because we have to do it so carefully. This is where the mindfulness comes in. That’s one of the definitions of mindfulness in the Canon: being very meticulous. The more meticulous you are, the better you remember things. You need to be very meticulous in keeping something in mind in order to maintain your concentration. This is one of the functions of right mindfulness. Once you’ve entered into a skillful mental state, mindfulness enables you to keep remembering to stay there. If you’re meticulous in doing this, you begin to see more clearly exactly what’s involved in getting the mind to settle down. This is why jhana is a transparent form of becoming: As you watch it, you begin to understand what becoming is all about. You can begin to identify which part of the practice is based on old kamma, which part is based on new kamma, which part is based on your present consciousness and all the other things that go along with it, and which part of it is watered by the sense of delight.

So the trick here is that once you’ve learn how to do this, the Buddha says, you learn how to see things simply as they have come to be. In other words, you

just look at what past kamma is being offered up to you right now. Our instinctive reaction always is to make something out of it, to do something with it. But to watch it simply as it comes into being without trying to create something out of it, without trying to destroy it, without even taking delight in the equanimity of watching it: That's the hard part.

It's pretty easy to get into a state of equanimity just watching these things, but it takes a lot of insight to realize that equanimity itself is a kind of doing. It's a way of creating something out of your experience, something you can delight in. So this goes deeper than just plain equanimity. The Buddha says you have to learn how not to make anything out of anything; even out of the jhana, even out of your strong concentration. When you can do that, you can break through to the Deathless.

So instead of just operating on the desire to get rid of things, we first learn how to create something really skillful out of them. This is the basic pattern of the Buddha's path. The fourth noble truth is to give rise to skillful states in the mind so you can understand what's involved in giving rise to a state. Then you get more sensitive to exactly what in the present moment is the given and what part's being added. In general, we're very ignorant of what we're adding to things. Yet even our normal experience of space and time is something that has already been added to.

The aggregates come in a potential form and then—based on which things we're interested in, which things we want to create, which things we want to destroy—we actually create our experience of the present out of these different potentials. So we have to do a lot of digging down in our experience of the present moment to see what's just the potential without anything added at all, not even equanimity. This requires that we get the mind really still and really alert and really interested in what it's doing.

This is how right view hovers around the meditation. Right effort and right mindfulness hover along with it. You try to give rise to what's skillful no matter what the situation: That's the right effort. Right mindfulness means being mindful to give rise to what's skillful, to abandon what's unskillful and—once you've entered into what's skillful—being mindful to stay with it. It's all very proactive, but, it's proactive in a transparent way.

This is why, when you begin to delve into right view, you realize that it covers the whole path. It's not just a matter of understanding something in an abstract way. It's learning how to see things in a new light and then acting on what you've seen in an appropriate way. It's not just a theory; it's a guide to action.

And while we're sitting here getting the mind to settle down and be still,

Ajaan Lee's image is that it's like having a chicken that lays eggs. You eat some of the eggs to keep yourself nourished and you take the eggs apart to see what eggs are made of, what their parts are. Or you watch how they develop. The analogy breaks down there, but ultimately you get to the point where you don't need the eggs any more, either for the nourishment or for the purpose of your investigation.

That's when you put the path aside. Even right view gets put aside. That's when you experience the noble truth of cessation. But in the meantime you want to make sure that right view is always there, hovering around your meditation to keep it on course and to make sure that what you're doing is transparent to you. That's how the process of becoming in concentration leads to something that goes beyond becoming, where there's no suffering at all.

And that, as the Buddha said, is the end of the problem.

Good & Bad Meditation

February 6, 2008

Meditation is supposed to work. It's supposed to make a difference. That's why we do it. So why do we sometimes hear that there's no such thing as good or bad meditation? Part of the reason is that when you start out meditating you're not a good judge of what's good and what's bad. This is a problem with meditators everywhere. If you're not familiar with the territory of the mind, you can't tell a step forward from a step back. And if you're tied up in the problems of conceit, it makes things even more difficult. If what looks like a step forward is happening, you can get puffed up, proud, and complacent. If what looks like a step back happens, you get depressed. Either that or you go into denial.

Which is why, at the very beginning, you're told not to pass judgment on your meditation. Just do it. This is especially true when you go to a place where everybody who walks in the door is taught meditation right away. They can't assume that you have the maturity or the experience needed to judge your meditation. But ideally you should be developing the qualities as you meditate that will eventually put you in a position where you can pass judgment in a skillful way.

And it should be the purpose of the meditation teacher to put you in the position where you don't need a meditation teacher anymore. The other day, I was talking to a friend who made the comment that it takes people twenty, thirty years to be able to judge their own meditation. That struck me as scary, because if after twenty years you can't tell when you're making progress or not, there's got to be something wrong with the meditation. Meditation should develop the mental skills and qualities that make you a good judge of your progress.

In the beginning it's good as to sit with whatever comes up, because one of the attitudes and skills you need to be a meditator is patience. You're able to sit with whatever happens. Whether it looks good or looks bad, you can sit with it. You can watch it. The purpose is not that you're just going to sit there and say, "Well, this is as good as it's going to ever get, so I might as well accept it and be happy with this." That's a very defeatist attitude. The purpose of patience is so you can watch and learn. The more patient you are, the more things you'll be able to see, because you can sit with whatever comes up.

This is why the Buddha taught Rahula meditation on the elements: Make your mind like water; make your mind like wind; make it like fire; make it like

earth. These things have no preferences. They are willing to wash away anything, good or bad; blow away anything, good or bad; burn anything or have anything thrown on them, good or bad, with no sense of revulsion or delight. They don't make choices as to what's nice and what's not. Now, the purpose of making your mind like this is not to make it a clod of dirt. It's to enable you to see what's going on—steadily, consistently, over a long period of time. This is because the insight we're after here is not simply that things are inconstant, but that there's a pattern to their inconstancy. You want to be able to see that pattern all the way from cause to effect and from effect back to cause. That requires that your gaze be steady and consistent.

It's like having measuring equipment in a scientific experiment. To begin with, you want the equipment to be set on a solid table set on a solid floor in a solid building on a solid piece of land. That way, if there's a little squiggle in the recording stylus, it actually has something to do with the experiment. It is not a result of the table's wobbling or the building's wobbling or a tremor underground. In addition, you want the stylus to keep riding continually. You don't want there to be a gap, say, from 1 a.m. until 5 a.m. Your experiment is a long-term experiment, and you want it to be 24/7. That's the kind of solidity and consistency you want in your mind in order to be able to see what's going on—so that when things are good, bad, or indifferent, you can stay right here.

The other quality that makes you a good observer is honesty: Whatever comes up, you're going to admit that it's come up. You're not going to go into denial and you're not going to embellish it, make it more than what it really is.

This is the foundation for a really scientific attitude toward the meditation. Sometimes you hear of specific methods as being scientific, that they've worked everything out, all the steps, and all you have to do is follow the steps. They even have all the questions and answers on cards; they have standard meditation talks. Everybody gets put through the same process. That's scientific in the same way that an assembly line is scientific, but it doesn't mean that the workers on the assembly line are going to be scientific, or they understand anything of what's going on. The process is too mechanical. That's not the science that the Buddha was teaching. He was teaching how to experiment, how to take joy in finding things out—which means that sometimes you do what you're told in the meditation and sometimes you do what you're not told, so you can see what happens.

Once you've got those qualities of honesty and patience under your belt, you can start playing around. Kurt Vonnegut once made the observation that scientists are basically little kids, and little kids like to play. Scientists like to play. They get grants and fellowships so that they can play big time. And of course, we hope that their playing will have some pay-off. There are whole branches of

science whose pragmatic pay-off is not immediately evident. But it's good to have people experimenting, trying to figure things out, because you never know when a chance discovery is going to be valuable.

And so it is with the meditation. When the Buddha taught, he taught techniques that open things up to questions. It wasn't that everything was all certain and mapped out and that all you have to do is follow the steps ABCD down the line. He would try to provoke questions in the mind: How do you breathe in a way that calms the effect of the breath on the body? Are you aware of the whole body when you breathe in and breathe out? After you've answered the Buddha's questions, you can start asking questions of your own. There's a pain in your legs: How do you breathe so as to minimize the pain, or to at least put you in a position where you're not feeling threatened by the pain? I've often found in my own practice that a particular blockage in the body suddenly makes the meditation really interesting. Once, in my first year, I had a problem with my foot. I spent hours breathing in different ways to see how it affected the pain in the foot, and I learned a lot more from that pain than I did from a pile of Dhamma books.

So this is the Buddha's approach to meditation. He would make sure you have the right personal qualities, that you could be trusted to conduct experiments and be more or less objective about the results, and then he would set you loose. Sometimes, as with many scientific experiments, you may follow a line of inquiry but it leads nowhere. Well, you've learned something. You've learned that that particular line of inquiry goes nowhere. Then you follow other lines of inquiry, and then others, until you find something that really does open things up in the mind.

So this is where having a sense of good and bad meditation finally does become useful. In one sense, every meditation is good if you've bring the right attitude to it, regarding it as an opportunity to learn. With that approach, bad is bad only in the sense that a particular line of reasoning doesn't go where you want it, or a particular approach doesn't really give you any real knowledge. But when you start getting sloppy, when you start assuming things that you shouldn't assume, feeling certain about things that are still uncertain—in other words, making the same kind of mistakes that a bad scientist might make: That's meditation that's really bad.

Sometimes you can see it. Sometimes there are cases where, fairly well into the meditation, you still need to talk things over with a teacher. But you want to get so that you can pass judgment on things in a judicious way—i.e., you're no longer judgmental, but you use your powers of judgment wisely, precisely, accurately, with real wisdom. You're responsible for your meditation. And once you accept that attitude of responsibility, you become a lot more careful, a lot

more mature. You don't blindly hope that the method on its own is going to carry you through. Your method will carry you through if you're alert and watchful and judicious in the ways you apply the method. That's when the meditation gets good.

Sweat the Small Stuff

February 28, 2008

In the course of our training, there are a lot of little things that we have to pay attention to—because if you don't pay attention to the little things, you miss the big things. Ajaan Mun once made a comment that it's very rare for a person to be blinded by a log. It's a lot more common for people to be blinded by sawdust. In other words, the fact that you're not paying attention to the little things can blind you.

This is an important principle in the practice. We're dealing with a large issue: suffering. But you're not going to see suffering if you just think about large issues all the time. When you're thinking about large issues, you're dealing in abstractions. And sometimes the abstractions can get too big to handle.

The biggest abstraction is this sense of "I am": "I am a good person; I am a bad person." If you feel that you're a bad person, you've got a lot of work to do to find the root of that badness. Most of us go swinging back and forth, feeling that we're perfectly fine, then we run across something that shows that we're not perfectly fine, so we run off in the other direction. We're miserable, we're hopeless. But neither attitude is helpful on the path.

This is why the Buddha—when he was about to teach his son, Rahula, how to meditate, even before he taught him the steps to breath meditation—told him to focus on the inconstancy of things so as to undercut the conceit, "I am." In other words, as you look at your own mind, you begin to realize that there are good intentions mixed up with bad intentions. If you look at the details, it's not a question of your having an underlying nature that's good or an underlying nature that's bad. You want to get away from the abstraction of "underlying nature" and simply look at what's going on. By paying attention to the moments when you catch yourself being unskillful, you work with that particular intention. You don't have to deal with your entire character all at once. Just see what's happening right here, right now, with that particular lack of skillfulness—because you can deal with individual events. They're not too much. They're not overwhelming. And as you develop this quality of being meticulous, you actually accomplish the training. You're developing the qualities needed for the path.

When we hear the word *conceit*—as in the conceit that "I am"—we usually think of it as meaning that we feel better than other people. But in the Buddhist sense of the term, it means any way that you compare yourself, set up yourself as

an entity that is either good or bad in comparison with other people. It could be the feeling that you're worse than they are, or even that you're equal to them. Those are also conceits. And the conceit that you've got a really big issue you've got to deal with here and you don't have time for the small issues: That really gets in the way. So in this sense, the humility that's required to say, "Yeah, I can change myself in meaningful ways through the small issues. I can change my habits, the habits of the mind here by attending to the details": That's the attitude that will see you through. That's the kind of humility you want. It's not the humility of saying that you're bad—because that's not really humility at all. Genuine humility is the humility that's willing to learn from the little things. That's what's useful in the practice.

Because after all the movements of the mind: What are they if not very little things? They're so quick that you can hardly notice them. This is one of the reasons why we deal with the little things on the external level first. Look at all the rules for the monks. Two big volumes, and that's just the distilled version. All the way from the big rules like not killing and not stealing down to the little rules like how to take care of your bowl, how to take care of your robe. And as Ajaan Suwat once pointed out, the rules are not just for the monks. Many of the monks' rules affect the way lay people are going to be interacting with the monks, in which case the lay people have to notice: Is this particular issue going to touch on a monks' rule or not. In that way the rules make the lay people more meticulous as well.

So as you learn to be observant of the little things around you, you're more likely to observe the little things inside. The little changes of the breath that indicate that greed has arisen, or anger has arisen, or fear has arisen: All too often we're aware of these emotions only after they've taken over the mind. But to deal with them most effectively, you want to be able to sense them just as they're getting started. And that requires that you be very sensitive to the subtleties of the breath—the subtleties of the feelings in the body that tend to go along with these emotions—so that you can catch them in time.

This is why focusing on the small things is not a distraction. I once encountered a person who had been trained in a Zen center who complained about our obsession with minutiae, as he called it. He saw it as a distraction from the big wide open emptiness, the big wide open liberation that's waiting when you stop focusing on little things. But it doesn't work that way. To see the deathless you have to be very precise in your powers of perception. After all, the deathless is always there. Why are we not seeing it? Because we're not sensitive enough. How do we become more sensitive? By focusing on the little things: those little movements of the mind that head off in a skillful or unskillful direction. How do you nurture the skillful ones and how do you get rid of the

unskillful ones? That's the big question.

So if you're dealing only with larger abstractions, you're going to miss the details because the larger abstractions say that the big deals are more important. There's that saying, "Don't sweat the small stuff, and it's all small stuff." Well there's some small stuff you gotta sweat. Humility is a lesson, humility is the quality that allows you to admit that there are lots of little things you've got to learn. You don't let yourself feel exasperated if they seem elementary or if you find yourself going back to the beginning again and again. Each time you go back to the beginning, you learn new things.

It's like going back and reading Ajaan Lee. I've personally found that with many of his writings, if you go back and read them again after a month or two, you see new things. It's the same book but you're a different person. You notice different details. The same principle applies to the breath. You keep coming back to the breath, back to the breath, and you begin to see more things over time. The process may be gradual, so gradual that you hardly notice. The image in the Canon is of a carpenter using a hammer. He knows that as he holds the hammer and uses it every day to pound away at the nails, the handle of the hammer is getting worn down. In any one day he can't measure how much it has been worn down, but over time he begins to see the wear marks. Someday it will wear completely through.

It's the same with progress in the mind: Sometimes it's incremental, but that doesn't mean it's any less real. The important thing is to be willing to learn the little things, notice the little things, master the little things, because it's in mastering the little things that the larger issues become clear. If you try to tackle the big issues right away—your basic character flaws or whatever—you're dealing mainly with abstractions, and abstractions can hide all kinds of stuff. They may sound big, important, impressive, but when you actually look at them, you see that there's not much there. They're a smokescreen: The important things are hidden, and all you see is the smoke.

So try to develop the attitude that you're willing to learn any lesson, no matter how small. And that's the attitude that will see you through.

Wilderness Lessons

March 6, 2008

Ajaan Fuang once commented that when Ajaan Mun went into the forest traveling to different caves and mountains, he always went with a purpose. There was a reason for his going. It wasn't that he simply wanted a change of scenery, or have a good time. He knew either that it would be a good place to meditate or that there were people there or beings there who might benefit from his teaching. Only if there was a reason would he go.

I mention this because tomorrow some of you are going to go up to the mountain, to spend the day in the forest there. It's good to think about why you're going, what you hope to accomplish, what you hope to gain from it, and who you may hope to help up there.

There are lots of lessons that can be learned from being out there. One that the Buddha noted was that when you go into the forest and hold the perception of wilderness in your mind, your mind is very different from when it has the perception of being in society. He contrasts the "village" perception and "human being" perception with the "wilderness" perception. The village and human being perceptions carry with them all the affairs of the people you have to deal with, all the issues that go around living in a village. And even though we live here in a forest monastery, there's a kind of a village here. So one thing you can notice when you go into the wilderness is how your mind changes. You can see a difference in the level of disturbance in your mind between being here where you have responsibilities and going up there where the responsibilities are very different. That's primarily a difference in perception. If you wanted to, you could carry all the village issues up the mountain with you, but you wouldn't be taking advantage of the opportunity to see the difference perception can make. You're not just going to a different place; you're carrying around a different perception of yourself in your surroundings.

This is a classic case of *bhava*, or becoming. It's based on a perception, which in turn is based on an intention—in this case the desire to get up on the mountain and let down some of the burdens and responsibilities of being here at the monastery. So there's a lesson you can learn right there: the power of perception over the level of stress or lack of stress in your mind. When you've learned that power, bring it back here.

We live in a world where wilderness for the most part is composed of little

islands of wildness surrounded by a sea of civilization. In the past it wasn't that way. Civilization formed the islands, and the wilderness was the sea. We have a slight taste of that here in the monastery. We've got chaparral on three sides. We live in an orchard but it's an orchard surrounded by wilderness. There are wilderness animals out there, and often they come infiltrating into the orchard, foraging for what they can find. They draw no lines in their heads between wilderness and civilization. In the same way, try to keep that sense of wilderness infiltrating your mind here, so that even as you return here and carry out your responsibilities, there's an element of wilderness aerating those responsibilities to keep them from being quite so heavy. You're free to shift into that perception at any time.

Remember also that wilderness isn't all just relaxation and openness. You have to be careful; there are dangers there. Our romanticized notion of nature tends to forget this. Being in the wilderness means you have to be careful. At present there may not be any wild animals up there that are going to attack you, but you have to be careful as you hike around. We've had wilderness trips in the past where people came back all scarred from being careless. The rocks and other sharp things up there on the mountain don't have the padded corners we often expect in society, so you have to be alert. This is another lesson that wilderness teaches: heedfulness, alertness.

And you're not alone out there. In the Buddha's cosmology, there are devas in the trees, devas in the mountains. When Ajaan Mun went to caves and mountains and forests, he would give thought to the other beings there. He would chant for them, he would spread good will, so that he was actually bringing something to them. And he'd often have to be careful not to offend them. There are stories of his going into caves where monks who had been there before had offended the resident devas by their lack of circumspection, by their general lack of manners. So keep that in mind as well. What energy are you taking up there? Do you know the manners of the forest?

One of the manners of the forest is you're always very clean and neat. That story I told today about Ajaan Lee and the banana grove: His comment on not leaving banana peels lying around applies to all kinds of situations in the forest, and not just to banana groves that appear through psychic power. Be careful of what you say, be careful of what you think, be careful of your impact on the place.

We had a weird incident years back up on the north rim of the Grand Canyon. We'd gone down from our camping spot on Parissawampitts Point to the nearby spring, a natural spring in a lovely meadow surrounded by spruce, pines, and aspen. As we were driving down, the guy who was driving—he was a real estate appraiser—happened to notice one little corner of the meadow that

was especially pretty. He thought to himself, “Gee, that would be a nice place to build a house.” Immediately he sensed a presence there that said, “No, go away. You’re not wanted here.” Before long we got down to the spring—it’s a spring that’s been covered up by cement to keep the water clean, and there’s a little cement cover on the top. It takes one or two people just to lift up the cover so you can get to the water. And it so happened that someone had left the cover open, and a crow had gotten into the spring and died—which meant that we couldn’t use the water in the spring at all.

So you need to have manners when you go in the forest.

At the same time, try to receive what the forest has to offer. Walk mindfully through the forest, walk with alertness through the forest, open your eyes to what’s there around you. Years back when I was first staying with Ajaan Fuang, one of his lay students came and invited him to visit an orchard over in Chantaburi. Ajaan Fuang took me along. The orchard bordered on a forest with a nice creek running through it. So we went and sat in meditation on the edge of the creek. After a while, Ajaan Fuang—who was maybe about twenty or thirty yards away—threw a stone into the creek to splash me. I opened my eyes and noticed that he was walking around, looking at the trees. I suddenly realized that’s what he wanted me to do: not just sit there with my eyes closed, but look.

Ajaan Lee tells of the many lessons you learn by looking in the forest: how trees survive, how the animals survive. The main lesson Ajaan Lee picked up from the forest was heedfulness. You have to be very watchful. You can’t be complacent. To survive in difficult situations, you have to learn to be quiet. When you go to a new place, always be quiet. Watch. See what you can learn. If you go in with the attitude that you already know everything you need to know—and this applies to all areas of life—all the lessons that are there just waiting to be picked up get ignored. So go both to give and to receive, to contemplate.

The mountain suffered a fire recently, so look at the ravages of the fire as you go there. You’ll notice that some plants are already beginning to sprout. Parts of the mountain are beginning to look green again. But other parts—huge parts—of the mountain are still black. There’s a lesson in kamma right there. Some of your actions are things that you can quickly recover from. Others leave deep scars for long periods of time. Another lesson in heedfulness.

So look around and see what kind of lessons you can learn while you’re up there. Make it a Dhamma exploring trip, not just a picnic as I heard one of you say. Use your ears, use your eyes, and keep your mind alert for the lessons of the forest. The National Park Service sign says take only pictures and memories, leave only footprints. Well, our attitude is to give what you can of your goodwill and bring back whatever lessons you can learn for training the mind.

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